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A Case Study of Community College Students' Perceptions Regarding Faculty's Practice of  
Online Course Delivery: Virginia Community College

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A dissertation  
presented to  
the faculty of the department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Doctor of Education

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by  
Loretta Roberts Beavers  
August 2009

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Dr. Terrence Tollefson

Keywords: Students' Perceptions, Online Courses, Virginia Community College,  
Distance Learning

## ABSTRACT

### A Case Study of Community College Students' Perceptions Regarding Faculty's Practice of Online Course Delivery: Virginia Community College

by

Loretta Roberts Beavers

This case study focused on students who had matriculated in online courses in the Business Management Program. The setting for the study was a Virginia community college. The purpose of this study was to examine the social, faculty and administrative, and technology influences on students' perceptions of online learning. Students' conveyed experiences and perceptions of the tools and practices faculty used to implement online learning were coded and categorized to generate grounded theory that may be used to govern distance learning implementation.

Data were collected through document reviews, semi-structured interviews, and field studies. The interview participants were selected from the 2008 graduates of the Business Management Program. Data from personal memos and field studies were collected through students' comments on individual courses. Interview data included descriptions of all the distance learning courses in which the interviewees had participated. The constant comparative method was used to analyze and code the data into themes that emerged and were applied to establish grounded theories that may prove to be useful in governing the tools and practices of distance learning in higher education.

The findings of the study indicated that as the number of online courses that a student successfully completed increased, so did the student's preference of distance learning over the

traditional classroom environment. The study also revealed that students were reluctant to participate in distance learning if their first experiences in this method of delivery had been negative; therefore, administrators should be more supportive and evaluative in selecting online faculty. Findings also indicated that even though students enjoyed the time and place flexibility and convenience of distance learning, they still expected instructors to create and implement an environment that cultivated students' social and academic success within the educational environment.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family: my husband, Mike, who supported and encouraged the completion of every task of this journey and our three sons, Mark, Eric, and Wesley, who called me Dr. Mom long before I admitted to myself the possibility of my earning that title.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Online delivery of instructional information is no longer considered a bad or good move but an inevitable move for colleges and universities if they plan to sustain a share of the student market. The student market isn't shrinking, but lifestyles of students are changing. Students are seeking feasible means of obtaining quality education while holding full-time employment and meeting family responsibilities. Asynchronous distance education courses provide this feasible means. Ongoing research provides quantitative data that support increased online enrollment, improved student retention and success rates, and the growth of online learning through educational institutions' adding new programs and growing existing ones (Allen & Seaman, 2007, p. 2). Now, administrators of colleges and universities must ensure that faculty who deliver online instructional information can meet the academic expectations of online students. Because students are a major component of all academic education, the more understanding academic leaders and faculty members have of students' perceptions of the practices used in implementing online courses, the better accommodating faculty can be to ensure quality academic education and positive learning experiences. "Placing people and relationships at the center of informational space will have a profound influence at all levels of academia" (The Horizon Report, 2008. p. 27).

Technology has advanced from being a support device in education to being a vehicle of instructional delivery for online courses. The increasing use of technology in education is forcing educators to reevaluate the importance of students' perceptions of faculty's teaching practices, because "... [T]he role of the teacher is changing as online environments develop" (Lofstrom & Nevgi, 2007). The Alfred P. Sloane Foundation, also known as The Sloan Consortium or Sloan-

C, is an organization dedicated to helping educational institutions improve their online programs. Its 2006 and 2007 (Allen & Seaman) reports provide statistical data on academic leaders, faculty members, and potential employers' acceptance of online courses. In a newsletter published by the U.S. Distance Learning Association, Hartman (2007), Drexel University Online's Director of Academic Affairs, explained that employers were developing a more "... favorable attitude toward online instruction" (p. 1). Students and employers are the end users of education. Their finding value in online learning will promote the growth of this form of learning; therefore, by understanding students' perceptions on online learning, educational institutions can improve the quality and implementation practices of this service.

#### *The Setting: Virginia Community College*

Undergraduates make up approximately 86% of online students. Of this approximate 86%, 62% are "taking courses at associate's institutions" (Allen & Seaman, 2007. p. 7) which identifies community colleges in Virginia. The Virginia community college (VCC) represented in this research is a rural community college that serves the counties of Buchanan, Dickenson, Russell, and Tazewell in rural Southwest Virginia. Virginia Community College was selected for the case study because of the declining population in the areas it serves and its rural location. According to the college's Fall 2008 Graduates in Virginia and Four County Area 1984-85 to 2006-07 report, the number of high school graduates in the four counties that the college serves has gone from 1,612 in 1990 to 1,148 in 2007 (Smith, 2008e). Of the 23 community colleges that make up the Virginia Community College System, VCC has maintained the "number 1" participation rate of the service area's population taking a course (Smith, 2008i); however, student enrollment continues to decline because of the declining population in its service area. It is one of the two community colleges in Virginia that experienced a decline in enrollment for the

fall 2007 semester (Smith, 2008h). Beginning with the academic year 2002-03, the annual full-time equivalent (credit hours divided by 30) has declined every year (Smith, 2008b). The online student market is a means of expanding the college's services beyond its geographical service area and attracting area potential students who have strict time and place constraints due to employment and family responsibilities.

Many of the approximately 3,600 students must commute long distances and on winding roads to attend classes on campus (Smith, 2008d). The economy has changed drastically since the school opened in 1967. Increases in travel and cost-of-living expenses have forced students to reconsider the priority of higher education. Students are arranging classes on a 2-or-3 day weekly schedule to reduce travel days and many are encountering time conflicts as they strive to juggle full work loads, family responsibilities, and education. Adult students need flexibility in fulfilling academic responsibilities. To be successful in completing academic goals, many adult students need to be "able to go to school while meeting the needs of work and family schedules" (Gonzales & Leo, 2005). Conflicts between education accommodations and family responsibilities are greatly reduced when taking online courses in lieu of physically attending traditional classroom courses.

Child care services aren't as common in rural areas as they are in metropolitan areas. According to VCC's Distance and Distributed Learning (DDL) Department's data, more females than males enrolled in distance education course. From fall 2001 semester through spring 2007 semester, approximately 78% of distance learners were females and approximately 22% were males (AV/DES Department, 2001-2007. Student Information Survey). The gender difference in VCC's overall student population was much closer. Female students make up approximately 58% and males make up approximately 42% of the college's student population (Smith, 2008c).

Online education is becoming more attractive as students realize the conveniences, savings, and opportunities this form of instructional delivery offers. It helps reduce or eliminate commute days and the inconvenience of time constraints because students can access the courses in an asynchronous learning environment. The asynchronous learning environment opens windows of learning opportunities when it is most convenient for the students to learn. Online education is giving today's students more choices of educational resources; therefore, such students have become more selective and have played greater roles in their educational choices (Gonzales & Leo, 2005). As the more conscientious students have elected to enroll in online courses, the expectations of the educational level of these courses rise. Virginia Community College has excellent technology facilities and exceptional technical support in its academic area so the responsibilities of students' successful completion of online courses lie primarily with faculty members and students.

Administrators' influence on the success of online courses is demonstrated through support and training of faculty members. Currently, training for online instructional delivery is not mandatory at VCC. Administrators are also responsible for ensuring that online courses are created and implemented to best accommodate students. Data support the facts that the more engaged college administrators are in online education and the more online learning is included in the college's strategic plans, the stronger acceptance faculty have of online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2007. p. 19).

Research on distance education, especially online courses, is a continuous endeavor in the academic world. Education has taken on new challenges in offering distance learning as colleges struggle to keep abreast of the newest trends in technology's effects on education. Both faculty and administrators of higher educational institutions are approaching this innovative teaching

method with cautioned audacity. They know the online student market is growing rapidly, from 9.7% of total college enrollment in 2002 to 19.8% in 2006, but they're also aware of the responsibilities and obligations of delivering high quality education to all students (Allen & Seaman, 2007. p. 5). According to the VCC's Institutional Research Officer, the college's overall full-time equivalent (FTE) student enrollment has slightly declined each year since 2005 (Smith, 2008a), but the data from the Distance and Distributed Learning (DDL) Department indicated the number of students enrolled in distance learning increased approximately 33% between 2005 and 2008 which is the equivalent of an approximately 345 FTE increase (AV/DES Department, 2000-2007. Annual Enrollment).

Very few of the current administrators employed at VCC have enrolled in and completed online academic courses; therefore, very few administrators are strong advocates of online courses even though they admit that instructional delivery via online courses is the wave of the future. Because the use of technology to deliver instructional content is still in the infancy stage, college administrators may be unsure of what goals to set and which direction should be taken to ensure quality and effective education for students (Gonzales & Lao, 2005). Many faculty members are also not strong advocates of online instructional delivery. The Sloan 2007 research found that approximately only one third of faculty "accept the value and legitimacy of online education" (Allen & Seaman, 2007. p. 18). Faculty members and administrators tend to justify low success rates by claiming that students who enroll in online courses aren't quality or conscientious students. Virginia Community College's Distance and Distributed Learning Director noted that successful online instructors change their teaching styles to accommodate the learning styles of their students (T. A. Cash, personal communication, April 1, 2008).

### *Addressing Online Education Issues*

Some students are reluctant to take online courses because they have the fear of being alone in a formal learning environment. They have the fear of not knowing how to express or demonstrate their level of learning. According to a research project set up by the University of Helsinki, teachers considered students' lack of time management and technology skills as hindrances to student success in online courses. Students cited "isolation, loneliness and the lack of practical ICT (information and communication technology) usability to be the main obstacles to learning" (Lofstrom & Nevgi, 2007). Because online instructional delivery is becoming increasingly popular and attracting a new market of students, studies are conducted to determine student retention and success rates in this type of courses. Currently, student retention and success rates in freshman and sophomore level courses appear to be lower in online courses than in traditional face-to-face (F2F) classroom courses (Morris & Finnegan, 2008-2009).

There has been an ongoing endeavor to produce documentation that supports student retention and success rates in online courses since the introduction of online learning. Quality of online education is also challenged by academic leaders. A Sloan Consortium study proclaims that "a majority of academic leaders (57%) believe learning outcomes for online education are equal to or superior to those of face-to-face instruction" (Wengert, 2006). This same article explains that many of those students seeking degrees online are also working for organizations. These students are simultaneously earning their education and gaining work experience. Some of these students already hold professional level jobs. These are the more serious students who appreciate the benefits of a formal education and are willing to meet or exceed the requirements of earning a degree. Their perceptions of the quality of online courses and the level of instructional delivery should be comparable to their perceptions of traditional courses.



This change in the student psychographics is forcing higher education institutions to evaluate the delivery of their online courses because this is the method of instruction most feasible to students who hold full-time employment. Successful online colleges such as University of Phoenix, Capella University, and Walden University “require mandatory faculty training” in which the faculty “undergo training in areas of technology, pedagogy, policies and procedures of the university, and best practices for facilitating courses online” (Gonzales & Lao, 2005). Currently, VCC doesn’t have strict guidelines in online instructional delivery. Students will eventually expect similar supporting characteristics and practices in online courses as they now expect in traditional courses. Faculty will need to have the same degree and quality of course content and implementation for online courses as they do for traditional face-to-face courses. The emphasis of this study is to provide qualitative data about students’ perceptions of their experiences in online courses that can be used to in creating guidelines to govern designing and implementing online courses.

### *Research Questions*

The research questions of this study focus on the description of a case study (Flick, 2006. p. 230). The sampling criteria are that the participants were students of VCC and enrolled in and completed online courses through the college to fulfill the requirements of the Business Management academic program. The following research questions provide direction for this study.

1. To what extent do college students perceive faculty’s practice of online course delivery as effective and meaningful in academic learning?
2. What responsibilities and practices of online instructors are perceived to enhance students’ learning experience in online courses?

3. What measures can be taken to ensure that online courses are perceived to be as beneficial to students as traditional face-to-face courses are?

The Distance and Distributed Learning Department of VCC has existing data that measure students' general perceptions of online courses. Because of time and available personnel constraints in conducting personal interviews, students who complete online courses are requested by the DDL Department personnel to complete a closed-ended Student Evaluation Sheet by selecting available choices which limit in-depth perceptions. The researcher attempts to collect qualitative data through open-ended questions in interviews to present students' perceptions of online courses. The document review provides statistical data and describes existing data on students' perceptions of online courses. Field observation data collections provide additional information regarding students' perceptions of online courses.

#### *Statement of Purpose*

Through this study, the researcher examined students' perceptions and experiences with online learning to discover what criteria students value and expect in online courses to ensure that these courses provide students the opportunity to fulfill their responsibilities to academic learning. This research examines students' perceptions of online learning to explore what tools and practices faculty can use to ensure quality learning and increase and cultivate student retention, success rate and satisfaction in online courses on the freshman and sophomore levels.

#### *Significance of the Study*

The significance of the study lies in the ability of VCC faculty and administrators to understand students' perceptions of online courses in order to create a model of online instructional delivery that will enhance student retention and success rates in online courses. This is a case study of VCC 2008 graduates of the Business Management online academic program.

The results of this research should be beneficial to all stakeholders of the college. Faculty will benefit from knowing what practices and tools students perceive as most beneficial to use to offer an excellent opportunity for students to learn in an online environment. Students will benefit by having a learning environment in which they can be more concerned about learning the academic content instead of trying to master technology and interpret faculty's instructions. Administration will benefit by gaining a marketing strategy that will be a positive representation of the college. And the college's service community will have better opportunities to obtain the training and academic credentials that support employment.

This study presents findings of what teaching practices students perceive to be supportive of student success and retention in online courses. The results of this study can be used to support and build policies and rules that govern student, instructor, and administration responsibilities in online courses. If these policies and rules demonstrate enough influence, they should become practices that online students and instructors can understand and use as guidelines for increasing student success and retention rates in these courses. Data collected through the process of conducting interviews with open-ended questions, reviewing existing documents, and participating in field studies were used to establish broad generalizations such as what online practices have positive effects on academic learning. Segments of data were compared to “determine similarities and differences” and categorized to “seek patterns in the data” (Merriam, 1998. p. 18). The data were coded and the codes were grouped into concepts that were categorized and used to establish grounded theory (Flick, 2006. p. 300).

### *Scope of the Study*

The researcher interviewed VCC graduates of the Business Management program and examined their perceptions of the online courses they participated in at the community college.

College documents beginning with the fall 2000 academic school year were reviewed to collect demographic and psychographics data on distance learning students. The field observation study data were collected by observing student behavior in activated online courses.

### *Definitions of Terms*

The following terms are defined for the purpose of this study.

1. *Canned course*: VCC's Distance and Distributed Learning Department defines a canned course as an online course in which all course material is created by textbook publishing companies and available online to students for a fee (T. A. Cash, personal communication, August 25, 2008).
2. *DDL*: Acronym for Distance and Distributed Learning Department
3. *Distance learner*: Student who engages in a learning environment separated from the instructor by physical distance.
4. *Distance learning*: "The United States Distance Learning Association defines distance education as the acquisition of knowledge and skills through mediated information and instruction, encompassing all technologies and other forms of learning at a distance" (Bower & Hardy, 2004). The learning may take place in a synchronous or asynchronous mode.
5. *FTE*: Acronym for full-time-equivalent student. Fifteen credit hours count as one FTE.
6. *F2F*: Acronym for synchronous courses that meet in traditional classroom format for face-to-face interaction.
7. *Instructional delivery*: Faculty presenting course content to learners. Instructional delivery can be in the format of face-to-face delivery, Web facilitated, hybrid or blended, and online (Allen & Seaman, 2007. p. 4).

8. *Online courses*: Courses “in which at least 80% of the course content is delivered online” and, typically, there are “no face-to-face meetings” (p. 4).
9. *Online education*: Delivering course content to learners via the Internet.
10. *Traditional courses*: “Course with no online technology used—content is delivered in writing or orally” (Allen & Seaman, 2007. p. 4). Courses that are taught synchronous in a physical classroom.

### *Statement of Researcher's Perspective*

I have implemented online courses for Virginia Community College since the fall 2000 semester. I have also completed master's and doctoral graduate level online courses beginning in the spring 2001 semester. Having been both a student and an instructor of online courses, I, therefore, have an understanding of online courses from a student's perspective and a faculty member's perspective.

These experiences as an online student and instructor have created biases on both sides. The primary bias is my existing assumptions of what tools and practices are effective in online courses. I may not be as open to innovative practices because I have had positive experiences of the effectiveness of my own practices. The institution selected for this study is the college at which I teach and also have the position of program head for the Business Management Program. The five students who agreed to be interviewed for the purpose of this study were graduates of the Business Management Program and students in the business courses I taught. Because those students have graduated, they should have no expectation of consequences or rewards from any faculty member and, therefore, should not be biased in their responses due to grade expectations. I intend to bracket my opinions about the practices used to deliver distance education to ensure that my perceptions of online courses do not influence the thoughts and perceptions of the

participants in this study. Because of my relationships with students, college administrators, and other faculty members, my interview transcriptions, coding, grouping of concepts, and categorizing to establish grounded theory will be reviewed by an IRB certified independent auditor to validate the data.

### *Theoretical Concepts*

Currently, of the two main modes of research, quantitative and qualitative, most data on online learning have been empirical. Empirical data reveal that there is an increase in the percentage of students enrolling in online courses but do not indicate the level of perceived quality or student and faculty satisfaction this method of course implementation offers. This research begins formulation of a theory that begins with the data collected through the interviews, field study, and reviews of existing documents that present statistical and psychographic data of distance learning students (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006. p. 27). Grounded theory is the chosen theoretical approach because the concepts emerge from the data, thus establishing an inductive theory “grounded in the data” (Chamberlain, 1995). Merriam (1998) explained that according to Glaser and Strauss, “the major difference between this methodology and other approaches to qualitative research is its emphasis upon theory development” (p. 17). Theoretical data may promote progress in online education by providing the framework that “may address problems of possible inaccurate ... conceptualization” of students’ perceptions of online courses (Dixon, 2008. p. 4).

### *Overview of Chapters*

This qualitative research study is designed as a case study focusing on students’ perceptions of online courses required in VCC’s Business Management academic program.

Chapter 1 of this research introduces the setting for the research and some issues the academic world is faced with in delivering online courses. Research questions that provide direction of the study were stated. The problem to be studied is explained as well as the significance of the study, the scope of the study, and the statement of my perspective on the topic. Chapter 2 presents existing literature on distance learning and five major influences on students' perceptions of online education: Technology, social and economic changes, changes in the student market, faculty's devotion to teaching and willingness to teach in various learning environments, and college administrators' support. Chapter 3 explains the design of the study, the participants of the study and the methods and procedures used to collect data. Chapter 4 includes the students' explanations of their perceptions of online courses and analysis of the collected data. Chapter 5 presents a summary of the research findings followed by conclusions and recommendations.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### *Introduction*

Technology is constantly changing societies of the world in the ways people live, work, play, and learn. Technology is driving education instead of education mandating what is taught, especially in technical curriculums (T. A. Cash, personal communication, April 1, 2008). Even though distance learning had an annual growth rate of 9.7% in 2006 compared to the overall growth rate of 1.5% in higher education, most colleges are still reluctant to embrace technology as a means of delivering course content in much the same manner as machines were resisted during the industrial era (Allen & Seaman, 2007. p. 1). Those educators who see benefits in technology-based instructional delivery are attracting student markets of all ages. Young students are attracted to technology delivery by their passion for technology (Colbert, 2007. p. 9). Older students are attracted to distance learning because of the accommodations of time and place constraints (Mendenhall, 2008. p. 12).

Course content delivery through online courses, also referred to as online learning and e-learning, is currently the most common form of distance learning in VCC's Business Division (Smith, 2008f). When the growth of this form of distance learning began to receive significant notice, students' retention and success rates were low and the quality of students who enrolled in online courses was questioned. An article in the *Canadian Journal of Education* indicated that although students' success and retention rates have been improving, they continue to be lower when compared to F2F courses (Mykota & Duncan, 2007). Now, the issues being questioned in online education are the quality of online courses and students' learning experiences. Course design and instructional delivery are being studied as part of the ongoing research to improve



these rates for students in online courses (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). The Alfred P. Sloane Foundation recently reported that “more than 60% of the nation’s academic leaders rate online instruction to be ‘as good or better’ than traditional face-to-face offerings” (Ebersole, 2007. pp 3, 5). An important criterion that will contribute to the success of the online learning product is students’ perceptions of this method of learning and the benefits they believe they will gain in their personal, social, and professional lives.

Statistical data exist that illustrate the increase in the percentage of students enrolling in online learning. According to the Babson Survey Research Group’s 2007 report, *Online Nation: Five Years of Growth in Online Learning*, online enrollment increased from 9.7% of total enrollment in postsecondary institutions granting degrees in fall 2002 to 19.8% in fall 2006 (Allen & Seaman. 2007, p. 5). The growth rate of online enrollments isn’t expected to level off, but the growth rate is predicted to slow down because most institutions that include distance learning in their strategic plans have already entered the market. Even if the increase in online learning has reached a plateau, nearly one fifth of college students make up a significant percentage of the student market and, therefore, merit studies that support online students’ selected learning mode (Allen & Seaman, 2006, p. 1).

Online learning is identified as a course with 80% or more of the instructional content delivered online with typically no F2F meetings (Allen & Seaman. 2007, p. 4). This increase in online course enrollment has brought about another delivery format that educational professionals must examine in order to fulfill the greatest possible potential in meeting student needs and expectations. The administrative question of why student retention and success rates of college freshmen and sophomores have remained typically lower in online learning as compared to F2F courses cannot be answered by simply knowing the statistically information

available through numerous researches. Answers to such questions as, What do students expect in the online environment? and, How can colleges fulfill these expectations? can best be addressed by discovering students' perceptions of online courses. Technology, social and economic changes, changes in the student market, faculty's devotion to teaching and willingness to teach in various learning environments, and college administrators' support are factors that have strong significant influences on students' perceptions of distance learning. This section of the research will present reviewed literature to examine the significance of each of these factors and its influences on students' perceptions of online courses.

### *Technology's Influences on Higher Education*

Technology in higher education encompasses more than just online learning. College students are required to have adequate technology skills to complete online administrative processes and academic assignments. Student services, administrative processes, and course assignments are moving toward the paperless society. Many F2F courses have a Web presence for students to complete quizzes and tests and to submit written assignments that require students to have technology skills (Pope, 2006). Most students who lack adequate technical skills perceive difficulty with technology as a barrier to learning. When students with adequate technical skills elect to enroll in distance learning courses, they don't expect to be challenged by the level of technology required to complete assignments. Technology should not be the driving force in any course; instead, it should be a vehicle to enhance learning. Online courses should be designed around the needs of the students and the desired learning outcomes instead of striving to use the latest technology to deliver the course information. If students are required to have access to high-speed Internet connections to access course materials, students who don't have

such access will have the perception that distance learning is beyond their grasp (Palooff & Pratt, 2007. p. 96).

Reserved students find the virtual learning environment, made possible through the use of technology, a more comfortable realm to participate in than the F2F classroom environment (Mendenhall, 2008. p. 12). In asynchronous discussion assignments, students have the opportunity to examine their work before presenting it to their peers. They have the opportunity to conduct research on topics and create meaningful comments that support their points of view; thus, building their confidence as successful students. According to Coombs-Richardson (2007), many such reserved students have excelled in online courses whereas they would not participate in a traditional classroom discussion. Older students, after learning how to use the technology required, have found their learning experiences to be more productive. In end-of-semester discussions of reflections of online courses, students state that advantages of online courses are their not having to put up with the class clown or younger students trying to waste time and not having to listen to instructors talk about non-course related topics. The time the learner devotes to learning is quality time. Those students who are self-motivated and interested in learning course content have positive perceptions of distance learning's use of technology to deliver course content (L. R. Beavers, personal communication, 2007-2008).

Publishing companies see distance learning as a market for extended products. For an access fee to each student, those companies offer complete online courses as supplemental products to the textbooks used in courses. However, unless online instructors carefully examine each section of the publisher's course options, they won't be familiar with the technology used or the skills required to complete the course work. Students expect online instructors to be as familiar with the technology used for online instructional delivery as they are with F2F delivery.

Instructors should have at least proficient skills in all technology they choose to use in their courses. When students discover that the instructor isn't familiar with the technology used in the online delivery format, they perceive the college and all involved in distance learning to be inadequate. They perceive the college as being interested in only making money and not interested in the quality of education or the quality of learning students should have (Tilson, 2003. p. 97).

Technology levels the learning field by allowing individualized instruction. It allows those students who "... come to education with different levels of knowledge, and learn at different rates" to adjust their learning time to best accommodate their learning needs (Mendenhall, 2008. p. 12). "Computers don't discriminate" is a fact that encourages students to "engage more with ideas than with personal characteristics" (p. 12). Each student, regardless of personal disposition and work and family responsibilities, is given the same opportunities to participate in course activities and assignments without the threat of being interrupted or the fear of being intimidated by other students who tend to dominate discussions in F2F classes. Most online courses aren't held to strict time schedules as F2F classes are and students aren't forced to "... bid against each other for an opportunity to speak" (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). Online learning "... offers the same instructional material to each student every time" and as often as it's needed (Mansour & Mupinga, 2007). Students can access the online courses as often as they want to best accommodate their learning opportunities. This allows students to create enthusiastic dialogue because all students have the same opportunity to respond to each participant.

One of the most detrimental features of online learning is problems with software compatibility issues. Course content should be the focus of the learning experience. Students

should not have to spend hours trying to learn how to complete or submit assignments. Online courses created in course management system software are easily navigated for both students and instructors. Problems arise when other software such as program files, test and quiz software, and evaluation or grading software are integrated into the course management system's software. As technology advances, slow Internet connections receive less considerations of file size and download time. When students perceive technology as more of a hindrance than a vehicle to support learning, they become discouraged with the learning process. A bad experience with technology in one online course can permanently steer students away from distance learning (Tilson, 2003, p. 97). If online learning is the only option for students who have prominent family and work responsibilities, these students will struggle to reach and maintain social status that education offers.

### *Evolving Social and Economic Perceptions of Higher Education*

Distance learning in the U.S. originated in 1881 with the Chautauqua Correspondence College. The University of Chicago initiated distance learning into the U.S. university system in 1892 by establishing an extension division. In addition to correspondence courses, radio and television were used to deliver course content. The military and home-study schools contributed to the slow growth of distance learning throughout the twentieth century. Although other countries throughout the world were more aggressive in delivering education by means of television, satellite, and the Internet, distance learning remained marginalized in the U.S. until the turn of the 21st century (Heeger, 2007, p. 5). Not only did technology become more sophisticated during the emerging of the new century, but its sophistication also brought changes in societies, government policies, and consumer demands for education alternatives.

The 20th century opened with the industrial age and evolved into the information age around the early part of the 1970s. A new knowledge age emerged at the closing of last century and continues to be a significant identifier of social status and economic support in this current century (Tilson, 2003. p. 12). The strength of this knowledge resource "... depends mainly on the people who possess it" (Brown & Duguid, 2000). People who possess knowledge and skills are less expendable in society and the work world than workers who possess only skills. The easy accessibility of information has contributed to the explosion of knowledge. Technology has now made it possible to accumulate "more knowledge in one year than previous generations accumulated in a lifetime" (Ebersole, 2007. p. 1). This phenomenon lessens the shelf life of knowledge, thus, making continuous learning a necessity. Distance learning is a way of fulfilling this necessity for students who can't "suspend their working lives for learning" (Muller, 2008. p. 11).

Society and the work world environments support the increasing value of degrees in higher education. "A college education is a necessity for achieving and maintaining a middle-class lifestyle" (Heeger, 2007. p. 11). The real threat to societies of the U.S. is no longer geographical isolation as it was in the past; the real threat "is exclusion from the security of the middle class" (p. 11). The middle class makes up 44% of the U.S. population with 27% of this social class being in the upper middle class. Education is considered to be a criterion obtainable by those who want it; therefore, the higher the social class, the more important education is to its members (Kotler & Armstrong, 2008. p. 134). Asynchronous distance education provides a means for the middle class to obtain this valuable criterion without jeopardizing work experience or family responsibilities.

The employment shift from industrial era to knowledge era brings jobs and careers that demand complex skills and sophisticated credentials. Seventy-five percent of America's adult workforce lack the higher degrees required to fill the information and services jobs that will drive 90% of the country's future economic growth. This deficiency of knowledge is threatening to the economic and social growth of the U.S. Geographic boundaries are becoming less prominent because information and services can be provided without the worker being present in the physical environment receiving the knowledge (Ebersole, 2007. p. 3). Online learning "is one example of how the process of learning itself can be adapted to meet the educational demands of the knowledge economy" (p. 1). With the availability of distance learning courses and programs, time and place constraints are far less significant barriers to obtaining formal education as was the case a decade ago. Therefore, distance learning courses have to be of equal quality to traditional F2F courses to be of equal value in society and industry. A survey of 151 learning executives in 2005 indicated that over 62% of employers favored online instruction and nearly 60% "expected the role of online higher education to increase in their organizations in the next two or three years" (Hartman, 2007. p. 1). Distance learning is attracting quality students and employers are recognizing the traits of successful online students. By completing online programs, students have demonstrated "maturity, initiative, self-discipline and strong goal orientation" (Mendenhall, 2008. p. 13).

Distance learning offers students the benefits of "mastering a new subject, being able to do so around the learner's schedule, and residing almost anywhere in the world while doing it" (Sull, 2007. p. 12). Distance learning courses have the potential to teach other valuable skills supportive of social adjustments such as writing, collaboration, time management, self-motivation, organization, tech savvy, and networking that will be useful to the learner's personal

and professional life. Instructors of distance learning courses should recognize the opportunity to promote and integrate these skills in the course's configuration, activities, and assignments (pp. 12-13). Students should recognize the refined nature of distance learning courses and use these opportunities to enhance development of these skills. Online courses also allow students and instructors the freedom to plan their learning or teaching schedule around other personal, social, and employment responsibilities (p. 14). Learning obligations don't have to disrupt students' lives to the point of their letting go of those facets of their lives that provide social growth or that contribute to the support of their lifestyles. Students who opt for online learning have to be aware of their priorities. One of the benefits of online learning is that maintaining family and work responsibilities and social obligations can remain priorities as the learning process is integrated without strict time and place constraints into students' lifestyles.

### *Transformations in the Student Market*

Students' perceptions of higher education on the community college level have changed from strictly faculty led courses to a friendlier learning environment due to sophisticated technology and the vanishing physical boundaries of colleges. Technology has significantly influenced education in regard to what is taught and how it's taught. "Higher education is facing a growing expectation to deliver services, content and media" in formats that are compatible to students' changing lifestyles (The Horizon Report, 2008. p. 5). Technology became increasingly sophisticated during the emergence of the 21st century, and its sophistication brought changes in consumer demands for educational alternatives to the F2F traditional method of instructional delivery. Technology added a new dimension to the broad definition of distance learning which is "... a process in which teaching transcends geography" (Heeger, 2007. p. 5). The Sloan Consortium's "learn anytime, anywhere" slogan is a common concept in higher education that



has taken on a very relevant meaning through the use of the Web in delivering course instructional information to students. Ninety percent of “... American teenagers are proficient Internet users” which is expected because the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act required “that every child be technologically literate by eighth grade” (Colbert, 2007. p. 9). Changes in the educational environment were and continued to be initiated by students’ passion for technology. Now, just as learning has to be continuous, changes in academic teaching have to be continuous to accommodate 21<sup>st</sup> century students’ new ways of learning. Findings in Sloan-C’s 2006 research report indicated that there is prevalent agreement among various institutions that “online education provides a level of access” to students who would not otherwise attend F2F classes (Mendenhall, 2006. p. 10).

A major challenge brought on with the use of technology in education is students’ expectations of the availability of learning opportunities. These opportunities shouldn’t be available to accommodate only the instructor of the course but should be available to accommodate all participants of the learning environment. Because students are considered to be major participants of higher education, considerations for their family and employment responsibilities are strongly encouraged especially on the community college level. Another challenge introduced by accommodating students’ responsibilities is the assurance that online courses are, at the very least, equal in quality to traditional F2F courses in the aspects of course content and content delivery.

Online course offerings in higher education began to receive significant attention around the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century; thus, the use of the Web to deliver instructional material in the form of online courses “is still relatively new” in higher education (Hartman, 2007. p. 13). However, this form of instructional delivery has had notable growth in the past 4 years.

Compared to the fall 2002 online enrollment at community colleges, the fall 2006 online enrollment had an increase of 24% (Guess, 2007). In-depth research is constantly being conducted to determine the effects and effectiveness online courses have on students and the colleges they attend. This innovative product delivery must meet the expectations of students, communities, and industry before it can be a successful product for higher educational institutions. Students have to recognize the benefits of online courses and have positive perceptions of this method of course instructional delivery in order for it to be successful.

Students' existing perceptions of higher education may be challenged, because the idea of tangible institutions dedicated to education isn't the setting for their classrooms. More often than not, their classrooms are their homes and this setting changes the culture of education. The actual time that distance learning students spend on active learning is generally longer than F2F students devote to the same task. Online courses typically require more reading and writing than comparable F2F courses and online students tend to do more research to validate their written correspondence before posting information in online courses. Distance learners have to be disciplined enough to "attend" online courses without the acknowledgement of the faculty member knowing exactly when the students attend. On a positive note, students may view themselves as pioneers in "the transformation of higher education itself" (Heeger, 2007. p. 11).

The market of online learners continues to increase as demands of lifelong learning become apparently necessary in many professions and careers. More than 96% of the colleges and universities in the U.S. are meeting these demands by offering online courses. In the fall of 2006, approximately 3.5 million students enrolled in online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2007. p. 1). Institutions of higher education recognized online courses as an opportunity to reach new markets of students by greatly reducing the time and place constraints and by offering the

convenience of students learning course information in their own homes. The ever increasing number of totally online programs is allowing students the option of completing degrees through colleges that would not be feasible otherwise. Students are no longer bound to local or residential colleges. They have the option of selecting “an education provider based on the satisfaction of ... individual learning needs” (Tilson, 2003. p. 2). The reduction of time and geographical controls increases competition among colleges, thus, making students’ perceptions of the quality, conveniences, and benefits of online courses more important to individual colleges that seek participation in the online student market. The fall 2006 Sloan Foundation survey “found that most growth was expected at institutions that are the most ‘engaged’ ...and believe that online is critical to the long-term strategy of their organization” (Guess, 2007). Even in online courses, students expect the presence of the instructor of the courses to be perceptible by the instructor engaging in the class discussions, giving acknowledgement of assignments received, and posting grades in a timely fashion.

Online courses are not differentiated from traditional courses on students’ transcripts; therefore, the perception of online courses should be comparable to that of traditional courses. Faculty members should use the utmost consideration of course quality and supporting students in online course delivery just as they do in implementing traditional F2F courses. Students’ perceptions of their learning experiences in online courses should be positive and rewarding. There are still students who shy away from distance learning courses because this form of instructional delivery is new. Cautious students will take one online course to determine their perceptions of this type of instruction. If students have bad experiences with the first online course they take, the chances of their taking another course in this same format is highly unlikely. An abundance of studies over a period of 5 years compared F2F instructional delivery

aspects to those of online courses. The studies indicate that although students learned well in both types of instructional delivery, online students "... are less satisfied with the learning experience" (Mentzer, Cryan, & Teclehaimanot, 2007). Students perceive the online learning environment to be void of social interaction, so students who enjoy socializing with classmates tend to prefer F2F courses. Other students who are more dedicated to work and family responsibilities appreciate having the opportunity to achieve meaningful learning experiences and earn credentials offered by higher educational institutions.

Online courses are more appealing to nontraditional students than to traditional students. The nontraditional student population is identified as comprising students who are 24 years old and over, working adults, particularly parents, overseas military personnel, and students with limited financial resources who have to maintain full employment while earning academic credits in a higher education institution (Ebersole, 2007, p. 3). Professionals may also decline the opportunity to attend traditional campus courses and interact in the campus environment yet have the need or desire to attain formal learning credentials. Online learning "helps to bridge the gap between work and school" which attracts those students "traditionally overlooked by formal higher education" (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006). These nontraditional students want relevance, practicality, and quality learning in the college courses they take. One of their educational goals is to gain knowledge and skills that will be applicable to their employment and supportive of promotions and upward career changers. They seek meaningful learning through the process of converging new information with previous knowledge structures as well as earning higher educational degrees (Lofstrom & Nevgi, 2007). Employers are recognizing that successful online students possess "maturity, initiative, self-discipline and strong goal orientation" characteristics (Mendenhall, 2008. p. 12).

According to a study conducted by Brown and Kulikowich in 2004, comparative course studies indicated no significant differences in students' success rates in online courses and F2F courses with graduate students. However, in two earlier studies, one in 2000 by Faux and Black-Hughes with 33 student participants and another in 2002 by Brown and Liedholm with 710 students, the results showed undergraduate students' success rate to be lower in online courses than in F2F courses (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). Because graduate students are considered to be more dedicated to self-improvement, these studies support the characteristics of successful online students that employers recognize. Successful online students demonstrate more involvement than just receiving information by passively listening to the instructor deliver course information. They actively participate in their learning process through reading, analyzing, and engaging in the "mindful processing of information" and acknowledging "their responsibility for learning" (Lofstrom & Nevgi, 2007). Online courses are perceived as the bridge to understanding education in reference to the student's own experiences and needs (Ebersol, 2007. p. 3). The faculty who teach online courses should be aware that these students expect a feasible and scholarly learning environment that can be flexible enough to accommodate other priorities and responsibilities in the student's life (Mupinga, Nora, & Yaw, 2006). Faculty should recognize and respect the expertise these nontraditional students bring to the learning environment.

### *Faculty's Influence on Students' Perceptions of Online Courses*

Faculty members play a strong role in influencing students' perceptions of online courses. "Just as there is good and bad classroom instruction, there is good and bad distance learning" (Mendenhall, 2008. p. 12). Academic evaluations have the same values and results in online courses as they do in F2F courses; therefore, students expect online faculty to be as

attentive to online students as they are to F2F students. Students' expectations of faculty's responsibilities in online courses differ little from F2F course expectations. Online students expect "regular and prompt communication with professors, prompt feedback on assignments, clear expectations of the professors, and academic rigor" (Mupinga et al., 2006). Technology can be used to enhance learning; however, it's still the instructor's responsible to teach the course information. An engaged faculty member is one of the strongest factors for supporting retention in almost all learning environments (McClure, 2007). Because online students and faculty don't meet F2F, regular online contacts with students can create strong faculty and student relationships and help students feel comfortable about participating in the social aspects of online courses such as discussion board topics and team or group activities. Contacts can be in the forms of feedback on assignments, announcements, informative email messages, and scheduled times for phone and in-person conversations and discussions. The "distant, not absent" concept of online courses is applicable to both faculty members and students of distance education (McClure, 2007).

Online learning is just as new to faculty as it is to students. Faculty members are encouraged to teach in a world very different from the one they learned in when they attended institutions of higher education. Some faculty members are reluctant to accept the responsibilities of online instructional delivery simply because they don't understand how this type of instructional delivery can offer a strong learning environment. They feel that taking the synchronous vocal lecture out of the course is taking out the opportunity for students to learn. The absence of F2F learning environments removes the ability for the instructor to gage the attentiveness of the students. They teach with the existing assumption that all students come to the arena with the same learning styles. They're missing the vast knowledge students with

professional work experience and parental obligations can bring to a course. These instructors may not know what criteria to use to ensure the greatest learning potential for students from vast backgrounds. Some faculty also question the infringement online courses have on academic freedom. They are resistant to online peer and supervisory reviews. It's possible that these faculty members shy away from online course delivery because such good records are kept of all times and dates of any course activity performed by students and faculty in the course site. The absence of such records indicates no activity. In this situation, faculty may feel that administration is using the monitoring of instructor activity in online courses as a means to control faculty's interaction with students.

Faculty's acceptance of teaching online courses depends on some of the same factors that influence students' decisions about taking online courses. Technology problems are more frustrating to instructors of online courses because they are responsible for presenting the course information. Instructors are ultimately responsible for the quality of the courses they teach. If they have to depend on weak tech support, their perception of online courses will be negative, therefore, influencing students to have a negative perception as well. Training in delivering online courses will alleviate some of the instructors' frustration by teaching different methods of achieving desired outcomes and using different tools to help students accomplish these outcomes. To develop a student's perspective on participating in distance learning, instructors should enroll in and complete all assignments required in online courses. These courses can be credit or noncredit courses.

Faculty members who implement online courses are representatives of an innovative product and should strive to make the product as attractive as possible. College administrators should ensure that faculty who implement online courses have a positive and supportive attitude

of distance education and have the ability to help students develop positive perceptions of online education. Surveys of students' perceptions of individual online courses should be reviewed carefully by administrators and faculty members and measures taken to address negative remarks if similar perceptions are shared by a large percentage of students.

Online students are more flexible to changing schools than traditional students are and online students expect to be accommodated for their flexibility of selecting the college that will be most supportive of their learning endeavors. Currently, to effectively implement an online course requires more time and effort on the part of the instructor than it does to teach a traditional course with comparable course content, requirements, and participation (Allen & Seaman, 2006. p. 12). A study conducted by Mupinga et al. (2006) revealed that the three top expectations of "online students were communication with the professor, instructor feedback, and challenging online courses" (p. 187). Online instructors can expect more one-on-one communication via e-mail and phone calls with online students as compared to F2F students. Online instructors also need to be visible through active and frequent participation in their online courses. If students perceive that the instructor isn't participating in the course, they also become less concerned about the instructor's role in the student-learning experience (Savery, 2005). A passive online instructor encourages online students to become passive learners or, even worse, nonparticipants in the course that results in low student retention and success rates. The nonparticipating instructor is more common in courses created by publishing companies, commonly known as canned courses, than in courses created and developed by the instructor. Although canned courses are not favored by students, this type of implementation has provided a means of delivery of online courses and is often used by faculty who prefer to teach F2F courses but are required to teach online courses. Implementing canned courses requires much less course



development time and course content knowledge of the instructor and does not support instructor and student interaction or encourage the instructor to establish a participant role in the course. If faculty members are reluctant to teach online courses, it is the responsibility of college administrators to see that the most effective and efficient methods of delivering the course content online are available to support instructors' implementation and students' learning.

### *Administration's Responsibility to Academics*

Administrators recognize online learning as a means to expand the boundaries of their colleges and service a larger share of the student market. They accept the concept of online learning as a means to increase credits per student that the government uses as a basis for granting educational funding to colleges. Most administrators have not been directly involved in online learning either as a student or an instructor so their understanding of online learning is through the perceptions of students and instructors. Administrators on all levels of VCC have expressed the preference of offering F2F courses over online courses. Top administrators view online courses as a threat to the quality of higher education. However, these reactions are common "whenever pedagogical innovations challenge the classroom as the privileged scenario for learning and instruction, and the teacher as ultimate source of knowledge and control" (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006). Both instructors and administrators should recognize that online courses have a prominent role in higher education and that innovative teaching is needed to accommodate online learning. Just as technology's integration is increasing in society, its integration is also increasing in education. Following the same century-old practices that have presented education to students isn't delivering the quality of academics necessary to support the value society has expressed upon education. Students' perceptions of the quality of online

courses should be equal to their perceptions of all college courses. These perceptions can be best supported if they are initiated by administrators and shared by instructors as well.

The quality of online courses, as with F2F courses, depends largely on the quality of the instructors of the courses. The role of online instructors is different from that of F2F instructors. In addition to knowing the course contents, online instructors have to be technological proficient and be available for student contacts beyond the normal course and office hours. Online instructors have to also be prepared to teach a course that may include students who are professionals in the content area. For example, an online management course may have seasoned managers enrolled as students who need educational credentials. These exceptional students' perceptions of the instructor and course content will determine the value these students have of the college's academic quality. This will inherently affect the perceptions industry will have of the graduates of the college. Online courses are the most likely to be outsourced to adjunct faculty and professionals in the field of study. Even though adjunct instructors may possess the subject knowledge, they may lack teaching skills. The responsibilities of delivering quality instruction aren't always a primary consideration of adjunct instructors because the teaching position isn't the main source of income (Lei, 2007). Teaching is a profession in itself and the responsibilities of delivering quality instruction should be viewed as a representation of higher education. Therefore, administrators should make every effort to ensure that each instructor of all courses is qualified in both subject knowledge and teaching skills and has the desire to implement academic instructions in the best possible format and upholding the utmost quality of education.

Administrators have to be supportive of teaching and andragogical practices in order for the practices to be comfortably accepted by faculty. A 2007 Sloan Consortium research found

that only about one third of the academic leaders surveyed believed the faculty of their schools “accept the value and legitimacy of online education” (Allen & Seaman, 2007. p. 18). This same research reported that of the 4,365 institutions participating in the study, only 1,539, approximately one third, were fully engaged in promoting distance learning (p. 11). This indicates that nearly two thirds of the academic leaders don’t fully support online learning. Until a majority of academic leaders strongly support online learning, faculty will be reluctant to accept it as a quality alternative to F2F learning. The instructor’s positive relationship with students in learning environments promotes academic learning; therefore, unless the instructor fully accepts online learning as an equal quality alternative to F2F learning, students’ perceptions of online learning will be inferior to the perceptions they have of F2F learning environments. Students are the initiating source for online learning. They have perceptions of what they think an online course should encompass. Those students who don’t have such perceptions tend to avoid distance learning courses. Administrators have to be very vigilant in their selection of online instructors. The selected instructors should possess the ability and desire to fulfill students’ learning expectations and they also need to be very supportive of academic learning.

Administrators are also responsible for the whole college’s support for all education. Because online student enrollment make up approximately one fifth of the student market (Allen & Seaman, 2007. p. 5), administrators should ensure that online instructors have administrative, technical, and staff support in implementing online courses. “Few faculty have had formal education or training in instructional design or learning theory” (Oblinger & Hankins, 2006). The effectiveness of distance education depends on the support of all stakeholders. Faculty, students, staff, and administrators need to accept distance education “as a practical and effective instructional method” in order for it to be considered “a successful method of delivering

education” (Bower & Hardy, 2004). Online courses require more time and effort to develop and implement than F2F course (Mendenhall, 2008. p. 13); therefore, online faculty members should be granted ownership of effective and efficient productive courses until they give them up voluntarily. Ownership of courses will elicit positive perceptions of teaching online and will foster students’ positive perceptions of the online course.

Someone has to be held accountable for the quality of courses in higher education whether these are traditional F2F courses or online courses. Students perceive the instructor to be accountable for the quality of learning available in all courses. Administrators have to realize the permanence of the tangible online courses as opposed to the intangible practices of F2F lecture courses (K. Fairbanks, personal communication, September 23, 2008.). Course instructions and students’ work are recorded in the online learning environment and can be viewed by anyone who has access to such information. Faculty and students should be aware of this tangible element in online learning. Students’ perceptions of online courses should not be studied in the same context as students’ perceptions of F2F courses because most accusations concerning online learning practices can be proved or disproved in online courses presented in course management systems. The tangibility of online learning can easily separate facts from fiction for both faculty and students.

Change in administrative support is slow in coming where there are academic or curricula paradigm shifts. Administrators can show support to faculty who teach online courses by acknowledging the fact that theories that serve as guidelines in implementing online courses have yet to be well established. In this innovative method of academic learning, all stakeholders are starting at ground zero and learning its characteristics and responsibilities as the measurements of epistemology unfold. Given the fact that a negative first experience with

distance learning can deter a student from other distance learning opportunities indefinitely, greater support on all levels will better cultivate the success of online learning.

### *Summary of Literature Review*

The review of literature provides an overview of five major influencers on students' perceptions of online courses. These five influencers are technology, social and economic changes, changes in the student market, faculty's devotion to teaching and willingness to teach in various learning environments, and college administrators' support. Faculty and administrators put the responsibilities of student retention and success rates in online courses on the student. However, these responsibilities are shared between the student and instructor in traditional F2F courses. Because administrators are more supportive of F2F courses as compared to online courses, it's understandable why faculty aren't held responsible for low student retention and success rates in online courses. Approximately two thirds of colleges that participated in research studies funded by the Sloan Consortium indicated that they weren't full engaged in including distance learning in their future goals (Allen & Seaman, 2007. p. 11).

The Virginia Community College represented in this research has implemented task committees to determine the direction of the college and what changes would improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the school's services. One of the task committees is addressing the status of distance learning and is writing a report to suggest practices that will have a positive effect on distance learning. This study explores the perceptions students have on the practices faculty currently use in implementing online courses. A deeper understanding of students' perceptions of these practices will enable instructors to design online courses that promote academic learning. Instructors will also have the opportunity to learn what students know of the education system and the responsibilities of the instructors and administrators. Explanations can

be offered the enhance students' understanding of the value of quality learning, correct communications, and adhering to the rules and guidelines set forth by the online instructor.

This study should help instructors include online learning practices so students will also be able to make a stronger connection between education and the work world. They will realize the value of academic learning in a social context and the value of the opportunity to learn online without the major disruption to personal and employment responsibilities. Administrators rated the major barrier to their college's widespread adoption of online learning as students needing "more discipline in online courses" (Allen & Seaman, 2007. p. 21). When faculty and administrators place the same value of academic learning on online courses as they do on traditional F2F courses, students will also perceive online courses and online instructors to be of equal quality as F2F courses.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### *Introduction*

The purpose of this research was to examine students' perceptions of online courses to discover what criteria students valued and expected in online courses to ensure that they were provided the opportunity to fulfill their responsibilities to academic learning. The data collected in the research assist in determining the most effective tools and practices faculty can use to ensure quality learning and increase and cultivate student retention, success rate, and satisfaction in online courses on the freshman and sophomore levels. This research study examined students' perceptions in the areas of culture and content of online courses, instructors' teaching practices in implementing online courses, and technology's influence in the learning process in online courses.

#### *Design of the Study*

A qualitative approach to better understand students' perceptions of their experiences in successfully completing online courses is most appropriate for this study. Quantitative analysis provides a broad analysis and does not provide a rich description of individual's perceptions of online experiences. This present study brings awareness to the importance and value of "nonmeasurable soft data" that may contribute to the success of online courses (Marshall & Rossman, 2006. p. 208). Merriam (1998) stated that qualitative research was used to "help us understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible" (p. 5). Online learning is one of the current innovations of education.

Empirical data indicate that this form of delivery is gaining strong student support; however, scant research exists that describes students' perceptions of this innovation.

Case study and grounded theory have origins in sociology and focus on human behavior. Case studies result in describing "a contemporary situation within its real-life context" and grounded theory develops "theories that describe or explain particular situations and accurately perceive and present another's world" (Jacelon & O'Dell, 2005). Both methods of research use similar sources for collecting data. A case study design is an appropriate form of qualitative research to explore and discovery students' perceptions of the tools and practices used in the delivery of online courses. The elaborated concept that emerges from the data establishes theory grounded in observations rather than construed theory based on previous studies (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006. p. 318). Three common methods of data collection for both grounded theory and case study methods are interviews, studying existing documents, and field studies or participant observations (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). "Using a combination of observations, interviewing, and document analysis" enables the researcher "to use different data sources to validate and cross-check findings" (Merriam, 1998. p. 137). A case study can be useful in bringing an understanding of educational issues, which may result in the improvement of practice through establishing grounded theories that provide guidelines for the use of educational practices.

### *Case Study*

A case study for this qualitative research was selected to gain an in-depth understanding of students' perceptions of the practices faculty use to implement online courses and to provide richly descriptive data of the topic (Merriam, 1998. p. 8). The uniqueness of the institution is considered for this case study. It is a rural community college and one of two colleges with



declining enrollment in the Virginia Community College System; yet, it has held the highest “proportion of its residents taking classes at the college than any other community college in the VCCS” since 1985 (Smith, 2008g).

The college’s Business Management Program is the college’s only program that offers some of the required courses in the online format only, therefore, the study is “intrinsically bound” to participants whose only choice was to complete online courses to earn the degree (p. 27). A case study was the best method to explore the thoughts, feelings, and desires of online students in the nature setting of online courses (p. 32). Through this research, “specific issues and problems of practice” in online courses were “identified and explained” by the students who participated in the study (p. 34). Merriam (1998) explains that “case study has proven particularly useful for studying educational innovations, for evaluating programs, and for informing policy (p. 41). These perceptions will serve as criteria to review the effectiveness of faculty’s teaching practices, technology, and administrative support used in creating and implementing online courses. Data for this research were collected through interviews with five of the eight VCC 2008 graduates of the Business Management Program. College documents beginning with fall 2000 semester were reviewed to collect demographic and psychographic data on students who participated in distance learning courses. Field study observation data were collected by observing student behavior in active online courses.

### *Grounded Theory*

The paradigm of online learning is in the infancy stage; therefore, there are few, if any, existing theories that predict or guide behavior of course content delivery and acceptance. Grounded theory “focuses on creating conceptual frameworks or theories through building inductive analysis from the data” collected for qualitative research (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007. p.

680). Grounded theory was introduced in the 1960s as a means of addressing socially oriented research. This method of research “emphasizes the importance of developing an understanding of human behavior through a process of discovery and induction” (Elliott & Lazenbatt, 2005. p 49).

The coding of the collected data advocated incorporating the grounded theory method in this study. Data collected were coded following the three procedures of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Each interview was coded upon completion before conducting the next interview. This allowed a more accurate understanding of individual perceptions. The open coding expressed “data and phenomena in the form of concepts” (Flick, 2006. p. 297). Axial coding grouped the subcategories to a larger category through the process of inductive and deductive reasoning by comparing and relating the categories (p. 302). After the potential core variable was identified, selective coding elaborated the development of the conceptual framework and integration of the categories that relate to it (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007. p. 280). Grounded theory is established through “consistently comparing pieces of data to emerging categories” (p. 163). The constant comparative method was used to develop categories, properties, and tentative hypotheses (Merriam, 1998. p. 191).

### *Setting for the Research*

A rural community college served as the setting for this research. Compared to the other community colleges in Virginia, the selected college has the greatest percentage of participation rate of area citizens enrolling in higher education. A strategy to halt declining enrollment is by expanding an institution’s services beyond identified physical boundaries. Distance learning, particularly online courses, provides this means of expanding service boundaries. A better understanding of students’ perceptions of the tools and practices faculty use to deliver online

learning will cultivate greater opportunities to meet students' expectations of academic education.

### *Participants of the Study*

The sample selection for the study was purposeful and small (Merriam, 1998, p. 8). Five of the eight VCC 2008 graduates of the Business Management academic program were interviewed to discover their perceptions of online courses. These participants had to successfully complete at least five online courses to earn an associate's degree in Business Management. This requirement ensures that not all the online courses the participants were successful in were courses of choice dependent upon the reputation of the course and instructor. These courses should produce the most accurate explanations of the participants' perceptions of online courses; therefore, providing "the best information to address the purpose of the research" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006. p. 126). This provided the opportunity to understand online courses from the participants' perspectives (p. 6). All participants interviewed were over the age of 21.

### *Interviews*

Interviews are the predominate source of data for this study. The five VCC Business Management graduates who participated as interviewees in the study were purposefully sampled. The students had to meet criteria of being students who had participated in online courses and were graduates of VCC's Business Management program because this is one of the two programs that is totally online programs offered by the college. Business Management is the only academic program that offers some of the courses only online and not in the traditional F2F format. Students were contacted by email, telephone, and face-to-face communication. The email

message requested that they participate in the study and contact me by a return message, phone call, or face-to-face meeting. Upon the agreement to participate, the participants were given detailed information about the study including reason for the study and how the information they provided would be used to evaluate practices used in implementing online courses at VCC. The participants were given the option to sign an individual IRB approved informed consent form and each participant was given a copy of the dated and approved form. The interviews were conducted at the time and place of the students' discretion. Students were informed that their participation in the study would remain anonymous if they so desired. The researcher requested permission to quote them in the final research report. Participants were advised that the interviews were being recorded so that the exact wording could be quoted in the study. If they preferred their interview not be recorded, they were advised that notes would be taken of the interview. They were also instructed to let the researcher know if, at any time, they felt uncomfortable about responding to a question or wanted to withdraw from the study. If they opted to withdraw from the study, all recorded information would be immediately destroyed. All interviews were conducted in private and interviewees were asked not to identify the course instructor when the information they provided was instructor related.

Personal information was not used to identify the student participants or the specific Virginia community college. To ensure students' confidentiality, participants were given the option of selecting a pseudonym to represent their participation in the study.

The interview questions were reviewed by the Director of Distance and Distributed Learning, a faculty member, and a student. The Director of DDL assisted in establishing questions that he felt would foster the assurance that online courses would be as beneficial to the students and the institutional as traditional F2F courses are. His focus was questions that would

help improve effective quality standards for VCC's distance learning, boost enrollment, and improve retention and success rates in distance learning (T. A. Cash, personal communication, August 25, 2008). His professionalism comes from 30+ years as an administrator and advocate of VCC's Distance Learning Department. An anonymous student, Mark, and James Dye, faculty member, also reviewed the interview questions for clarity and classification.

### *Document Reviews*

Documents selected for review were provided by VCC's Distance and Distributed Learning Department (DDL) and the Institutional Research and Assessment Office. Data on students' perceptions were also collected from the researcher's memos. This information was collected by the researcher in an effort to better understand students' perceptions of the practices she used to implement her online courses. The DDL documents provided demographic and psychographic data about online students. The data provided evidence that online learning enrollment has increased each year since 2000. Because students participating in online learning are now a major part of VCC's student body, it is necessary to develop an understanding of how students perceive the instructional delivery practices and academic quality of online courses. The Institutional Research and Assessment Office's documents provided a means of comparing the growth or decline of VCC's entire student population to the growth of online students. The research and assessment documents also provided statistical data relevant to the study such as VCC's service area's general population and a comparison of other Virginia community colleges' enrollment.

### *Field Observations*

McMilland and Schumacher (2006) described participant observation as enabling "the researcher to obtain people's perceptions of events and processes expressed in their actions and

expressed as feelings, thoughts, and beliefs” (p. 347). Because I implement four of the five required online courses in the Business Management Program, field observations were easily conducted throughout an entire semester. I participated in the online courses by posting and evaluating assignments and communicating with the students on a regular basis. Students were given the option of consenting or not consenting to my using the information they included in the last discussion topic of the course. They were informed that if consent were given, a review of their participation behavior, experiences, and perceptions throughout the semester would be conducted. Data were collected through observing how often students were active in the courses, how they adhered to deadlines, and how they communicated with me. An active, prompt student indicated one who was satisfied with the implementation of the online course.

All students were informed of the observations and that the data collected from the observations would be presented in a qualitative research study. They were informed that the purpose of the study was to examine students’ perceptions of online courses and that the results of the study would be available to faculty and administrators in an effort to bring an understanding of students’ perceptions of online courses.

### *Data Analysis*

Merriam (1998) stated that the constant comparative method of data analysis was a basic analysis that constantly compares data collected in interviews, documents reviewed, and field observations notes that “lead to tentative categories that are then compared to each other and to other instances” (p. 159). Glaser and Strauss developed this method of data analysis “as a means of developing grounded theory” (p. 159). This study uses the constant comparison method to identify conceptual categories, properties, and hypotheses. Coding was also used to identify themes in the three data collecting methods. Themes were identified and data were sorted into

common identified groupings (Merriam, 1998. pp. 164-165). The identified groupings included instruction and administration, technology, content, and social and relevance. These groupings helped to identify which areas students found to be most beneficial and which areas they found to be less supportive of their learning experiences.

### *Interviews*

The interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis. This environment allowed the interviewees to freely comment on any issue or topic they wanted to discuss in reference to the study. I transcribed the audio recorded interviews and analyzed the data using the constant comparative method developed by Glaser and Strauss (Merriam, 1998. p. 159) by noting the similar comments made by the students interviewed. These comments were also compared to the information collected from document reviews and field study observations notes. Students shared their perceptions of what they thought were beneficial or detrimental practices that faculty used in implementing online course.

The transcripts were coded on three levels as explained by Flick (2006): open coding by dividing data into similar groupings and forming preliminary categories, axial coding that identified categories into groupings to resemble themes, and selective coding that organized and integrated categories and themes into coherent understanding (pp. 297-302). On the initial reading, the transcripts were not coded so I could get a general understanding of the students' perceptions of the practices used to implement online courses. The recorded interviews were carefully listened to while reading the transcripts to ensure that the emotions of the students interviewed were well documented in the transcripts. Because I have extensive experience in the practices used to implement online courses, line-by-line open coding was applied to lessen my personal opinion of the transcripts. This initial coding determined what "categories were attached

to the text” (p. 300). Axial coding applied on the third reading identified significant passages and established “relations between categories and their subcategories” (p. 301). This coded the categories that were “most relevant to the research question” (p. 302). Selective coding was the final level of coding and it provided the core concepts of students’ perceptions of online courses. It identified the core variable by the meanings, experiences, and expectations of the students interviewed. The interview scripts and coding were reviewed by an IRB certified independent auditor. The auditor’s review ensured that the coding was unbiased and the relationships were grouped according to concepts as explained by the student participant.

### *Document Reviews*

Virginia Community College’s Distance and Distributed Learning Department (DDL) has maintained documents of students’ perceptions of the distance learning courses that are distributed through its office. These documents were reviewed beginning with the year 2000 which was near the beginning of VCC’s offering online courses and ended with the 2007 spring semester, which was the last semester DDL conducted the survey. Psychographic and demographic data were collected from these documents. A distinction is not made on the DDL’s documents as to the type of distance learning course in which students participated; however, the percentage of online courses offered is increasing as the percentage of video courses offered decreases as they are replaced by online courses. I have also collected students’ responses to discussion topics that were included in each of the online courses that I have implemented. Only general psychographic data were collected from my documents such as suggestions for course improvement, which practices were beneficial and which were least favored. No class progress or student identity was revealed.



Documents provided by the Institutional Research and Assessment office included statistical data of the entire VCC student body and the community colleges that make up the Virginia Community College System. Reviewing these documents confirmed the increased percentage of VCC's student body enrolling in distance learning courses.

### *Field Observations*

Merriam (1998) suggested that a skilled observer knows “how to write descriptively” (p. 95). The observer knows “how to separate detail from trivia” and uses “rigorous methods to validate observations” (p. 95). Because this study is about online courses, there is no physical setting but there is a culture unique to each online course. This culture and how the participants interacted and completed assignments were explained. The purpose of the field observations was not to evaluate the level of academic success of each student but to study students' behavior in meeting the requirements of the course and note their perceptions of the practices of instruction. My behavior in collecting observation data was very important because my role was that of the instructor. This may have caused some students to present their perceptions of online learning as being better than their true perceptions. To lessen the influence of concerns toward final grade averages, students were not given the option to consent to the use of their participation during the semester until after final grades were posted. In the request for consent, I explained to the students that the observation data would be presented in a doctoral dissertation; however, all assignments and participation would be evaluated without consideration of the research because final grades had been posted prior to their consent. The data collected in observations were analyzed through the interpretive orientation of research that is based on the perception that “education is considered to be a process and school is a lived experience” (p. 4).

### *Quality and Verification*

According to Merriam (1998), “ensuring validity and reliability in qualitative research involves conducting the investigation in an ethical manner” (p. 198). This means not designing the study to reflect the researcher’s view points and not coercing participants to support her preconceived opinions of the research topic. Internal validity is measured by how close to reality the data is presented. Because the researcher is the instrument in qualitative studies, she has to be very careful to not assess the data inappropriately. Analyzing the data to best represent the participants’ true meanings is a necessary criterion to ensure quality research. A true understanding of students’ perceptions would be valuable to me because most of the courses I teach are online courses. A valid and reliable research would enable me to improve the practices I use to implement online courses. Data were collected with my intention of translating and reporting all findings to represent the informants’ meanings as close as possible. Two techniques explained by Merriam (1998) were used to ensure the dependability of the results:

1. Clarifying the investigator’s position on the topic of the research, identifying criteria used in selecting participants for the study, and providing a description of the participants’ enhanced comprehension of the position of the study.
2. Triangulation was used by comparing data collected in the interviews, documents reviews, and field observations (pp. 206-207).

The independent auditor’s review of the interview scripts also supported the validity and dependability of the results.

Upon correct interpretation of the internal validity, the results may be used to establish theories that will provide guidelines to improve practices in nearly all online learning. This provides external validity to the research. Rich, thick descriptions of the students’ perceptions

were provided so comparisons could be made to online learning in other academic courses outside the Business Management Program. Five 2008 graduates of VCC's Business Management Program were purposefully selected to be interviewed. Five of the required courses in the selected program are offered only in the online format; therefore, these students had to complete at least five online courses to earn their degree in Business Management. In addition to the 3 online courses I taught, the five participants explained their experiences in 10 other distance learning courses. Together, the participants had 55 online courses and each of the five students developed his or her own perception of each online course discussed (pp. 207-212). The participants were not limited to explain their perceptions of only online business courses. Any course they chose to discuss was included in the data analysis.

### *Conclusion*

Online courses vary as widely as traditional F2F courses do in quality and student satisfaction. Because online courses are still relatively new in education, there is an excellent opportunity to discover the most effective and efficient practices to use in designing and implementing online courses to ensure the greatest benefit to all stakeholders. Because of the importance of this research, I hope to present students' truthful and unbiased perceptions of online courses to help create productive policies and procedures that govern online education.

One of my main concerns was the comfort of the students who agreed to participate in this study through the interview. Graduates were selected to alleviate the fear of influencing their grades because they were not in the process of earning grades. No student or course instructor was identified and the focus of the study was the students' perceptions of their experiences in completing online courses. My interest in the research topic and my desire to prominently advocate online education served as my guide to seek for truth in this research.

## CHAPTER 4

### DATA ANALYSIS

#### *Introduction*

The purpose of this study was to examine students' perceptions of the tools and practices faculty use in online learning. The triangulation process using data collected from document reviews, interviews, and field studies provided credibility to the study. Data from these three methods of collection were coded according to concepts, categories, and themes to establish grounded theory that may be used to govern the creation and implementation of online learning. There was consistency of students' perceptions in the three data collecting methods. Data analysis began with document reviews because these introduced the earliest data of the study. The statistical data provided by the Institutional Research and Assessment Office confirmed reasons to address distance learning as a means to increase student enrollment for VCC. Data collected from the Distance and Distributed Learning Department documents began with the 2000 spring semester and ended with 2007 spring semester. These documents were provided by VCC's DDL Department. The DDL Department did not conduct surveys to collect students' psychographic and statistical data after the 2007 spring semester. Data were also collected from my memos or journalistic accounts of students' comments from 2007 summer semester, 2008 spring semester, and 2008 summer semester, which according to Merriam are also a source classified as documents because the data were already "in existence prior to the research at hand" (1998, p. 113). These personal memos in journalistic accounts format consisted of students' responses to questions concerning the tools and practices used to deliver online learning and were not collected for the purpose of this study. The comments were saved and reviewed in an

effort to continuously improve the implementation of online learning each semester. All comments were saved as anonymous entities.

The five interviews conducted on May 3 through May 10, 2009, provided the majority of data used to establish grounded theory that may be used as guidelines in creating and conducting online learning. For the purpose of this study, the five former students who were interviewed were referred to as the graduates because all were 2008 graduates of VCC's Business Management Program. Each individual graduate was referred as Graduate 1 through 5 depending on his or her order of the interview. Each graduate was sent via email a copy of his or her interview transcript for review.

The last group of data collection was the most recent to occur. Data were collected from field studies by noting students' behavior and practices used to complete assignments and meet course requirements for the 2009 spring semester beginning on January 8, 2009, and ending on May 12, 2009. Students gave their consent for me to review and study their behavior and practices in their online courses after final grades were posted on May 12, 2009. Students gave their consent by either responding to questions included in a postsemester discussion topic or by simply stating that consent was given to study and explain their behavior and practices throughout the 2009 spring semester. This request was posted as an announcement and as a final discussion topic in each of the six online courses I implemented for the semester.

### *Document Review Analysis*

Statistical data showed a decline in VCC's service area's high school graduates beginning in 1990 and continuing until 2007. Traditionally, this group has provided the largest number of students to make up the student population of VCC. Statistical data of VCC's spring 2008 student population specified the increased percentage of FTEs obtained through distance

learning. The other document review analysis data were collected at the end of semesters and reflected information provided by students who were completing distance learning courses for the semester. Students who participated in online learning but didn't complete the courses were not represented in this study because data were not available from those students. The DDL Department provided statistical data on students who enrolled in video, televised, and online courses. Data were collected at the end of each semester when students came to the DDL Department to return course material, turn in assignments, and complete tests. As online learning became more common, fewer students came to the DDL Department because course requirements were completed online; therefore, less data were collected in the more recent years than in earlier years of the time period selected for the study (T. A. Cash, personal communication, October 10, 2008).

My personal memos were saved in a journal entry format. These consist of students' comments to questions posted in the final discussion topic of each course I implemented in semesters previous to my collecting data for this study. These personal memos are defined as personal communications according to the fifth edition of Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (2001, p. 214). Courses are deleted from VCC's online management system at the end of one year; therefore, these memos are "nonarchived discussion groups" and are "not recoverable data" that identify courses or students who participated in the courses (p. 214).

### *Institutional Research and Assessment Reports*

The statistical data provided by the Institutional Research and Assessment Office offered significant reasons for VCC to address students' perceptions of online learning that the college delivers. The number of high school graduates in the four counties that the college serves has

gone from 1,612 in 1990 to 1,148 in 2007 (Smith, 2008e). Even though VCC continues to hold the highest “proportion of its residents taking classes at the college” of any of the 23 community colleges in the Virginia Community College System, enrollment continues to decline because of the service area’s declining population (Smith, 2008g). According to the Spring 2008 On-campus Class Schedule Report (Smith, 2008f), VCC had 1,263.58 FTEs. Of this FTE total, distance learning instructional delivery made up 474.99 of the FTEs with Web-based FTEs totaling 200.26, which is more than 42% of distance learning course delivery and approximately 16% of total FTEs. The approximate 16% is a significant number of FTEs in reference to VCC’s declining enrollment and its service area’s declining population. Online learning is an opportunity for VCC to reach students beyond its service region and should be one of the focuses of improvements in course delivery. Understanding students’ perceptions of the tools and practices faculty use to implement online learning should help faculty and administration govern criteria used to create and deliver courses for effective online learning that attract additional students outside the service area.

#### *Distance and Distributed Learning Documents*

The data collected by the DDL Department provided information of the students who enrolled in distance learning. At the end of each semester, those students who came to DDL’s office were requested to complete a survey; therefore, the data represented mostly successful students who were completing distance learning courses. The data described some demographic and psychographic characteristics that administrators should consider when assigning faculty to implement online courses and faculty should consider when creating courses for online learning. The largest number of student surveys, 857, was collected in 2002 spring semester. The fewest number of surveys, 288, was collected in 2007 spring semester, which was the last semester

DDL collected data with the surveys. The declining survey participant rate was the result of fewer students having to visit the DDL's office to complete assignments as more courses became totally online.

A total of 11,428 students completed the DDL survey beginning with the 2000 spring semester and ending with the 2007 spring semester. Female students made up 77.59% of this total and most, 48.26%, cited the reason for taking the course through distance learning was scheduling conflict, which included conflicts with other courses, work schedules, and personal schedules. Other available choices included course not available on campus, baby-sitter problem, needed additional credits, transportation problem, and other. Students ages 18-22 made up 39.51% of those students surveyed followed by 25.67% of those between the ages of 31-45 and 23.08% of 23-30 year olds. The other 11.74% consisted of students age 17 or below or over 45. Single students accounted for 53% of the survey participants. Only 33.94% had full-time employment. The others were full-time housewives, employed part time, temporarily unemployed, or other. Of the 71.78% participants who were full time students, 55.74% took at least 12 course credits, the minimum required to be classified as full-time students. This student status is a requirement to qualify for full financial aid which 76.93% of the participants received. The educational level of the distance learning students consisted of 33.78% with 0-30 college credits, 28.10% with 31-60 college credits, and 22.87% with more than 60 college credits. Over 73% indicated they would not have taken the course if it had not been offered as a distance learning course.

This review of DDL's survey results presented an overview of the characteristics of VCC's student market in distance learning. The fact that 73% would not have taken the course if



it had not been offered through distance learning is a criterion to consider, especially in the situation of overall declining enrollment.

### *Researcher's Memos*

I began collecting student responses to discussion topic questions in the 2007 summer semester. The questions made up the final discussion topic for the semester and addressed students' perceptions of the course they were completing. The responses were collected in a journal format and reviewed in an effort to improve the delivery of online learning. These personal memos are "nonarchived discussion groups" and are "not recoverable data" that identify courses or students who participated in the courses; therefore, data from this resource meet the definition of personal communications according to the fifth edition of Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (2001, p. 214). The respondents' comments were coded by concepts into categories and then categorized into themes that emerged from the data. These themes illustrated what tools and practices students perceived as a benefit or hindrance to successful online learning and may be used to establish grounded theory.

Most of the responses indicated that students enjoyed the convenience of completing assignments on their own time. Although all the courses had due dates and all assignment descriptions were posted at the beginning of the semester, the assignments were posted on a weekly basis and students had 1 week to complete all assignments for that week. This practice was considered to be a convenience to students. The organization and well defined structure of the courses was cited as a positive practice. Students appreciated the posted description of all assignments, instructions, and due dates.

The entries that were very positive about distance learning noted that the courses had supporting cultures. They stated that cultures were just as easy to establish in distance learning

courses as in face-to-face courses if all the requirements are clearly stated by the instructor at the beginning of the semester. Due dates were considered a strong supporter of the culture because students had to be self motivated and the due dates reminded them of their responsibilities. One entry stated that the culture of distance learning is very new age. Students could come and go as they pleased and there was always evidence that somebody else had been there, too.

Discussion topics were viewed as a positive tool for online learning. This tool was considered to be as effective as classroom discussion. Some comments indicated that classroom discussions were more effective, but more respondents commented that online discussions allowed students the freedom to be as expressive as they wanted to be without feeling uncomfortable. It also offered students the opportunity to do research and be surer of comments they made on the topic or issue. Most respondents stated that they felt they learned as much or more in an online course with discussion topics as they would have had they taken the course in a traditional classroom. Essays were also stated as being a favored tool by respondents. These written assignments were described as means to demonstrate knowledge of topics and issues and enhance communications among class members.

Scheduling was the most frequently cited reason for enrolling in online learning with work schedules being the main consideration. Flexibility to work on assignments at a convenient time allowed students to work around work and personal schedules and still get an education. Although some comments favored online courses, many preferred a F2F learning environment. Most respondents predicted that enrollment in distance learning would increase but they also stated that traditional courses would always be a major part of higher education.

Interacting with the instructor and other students was cited as the greatest loss in online learning. Those who commented on the responsibility of student success stated that the degree of

success depended on the student. Motivation and self-discipline were cited as necessary criteria for student success. Students compared instructors of online learning and noted that the instructor's level of involvement and guidance in the online course was as strong a criterion in students' comfort level and their level of learning and understanding course content as it was in traditional classroom courses. Technology was seldom mentioned as being a benefit or hindrance in meeting the requirements of distance learning.

### *Interview Analysis*

I recorded and transcribed data from the interviews. The transcription, carefully listening and typing out the interviews, helped the researcher catch slight comments and emotions that were relevant to the coding and categorizing of the themes that emerged from the interview conversations. Open coding was the second step used to identify "a list of priorities related" to the purpose of the study (Flick, 2006. p. 140). This coding process was the "analytic process by which concepts" were identified and developed according to their similarities and distinctive instances in reference to the research questions of the study (p. 300).

Axial coding was the third step in which the categories most relevant to the study's research questions were selected for further development. Relationships were categorized and reexamined based on common statements made by the interview participants. Selective coding was the fourth step that combined categories and subcategories into themes. These themes were formulated around the central framework of the study which is discovering students' perceptions of the tools and practices faculty use to deliver online learning. The goal was to establish grounded theory that identified criteria supportive of student success in distance learning (Flick, 2006. pp. 302-302).

The five graduates who participated in the interviews provided important data for the study. Without these participants, this study would have lacked the first-hand, in-depth explanations of students' perceptions of the tools and practices faculty used to delivery distance learning courses. Graduates were selected to alleviate the influence of grade concern. The group was labeled Graduates and each graduate was given a number 1 through 5 according to their placement in the interviews. These graduates shared their feelings, thoughts, and experiences in the interviews as they portrayed their perceptions of the online learning environment.

### *Graduates' Profiles*

The five interview participants were 2008 graduates of VCC's Business Management Program. The following brief description of each graduate introduces him or her to the reader. This introduction illustrates the differences among distance learning students who strived for the same goal of earning a higher education degree.

Graduate 1 is a widow in her late 50s. Her home is shared with her son and his wife and son. She has full-time employment and is attending a 4-year institution via distance learning in pursuit of a bachelor's degree in management or business administration; she wasn't sure which. She loves online learning because it provides the opportunity for her to learn without causing very many interruptions to her everyday life. As her academic advisor, I had met with and discussed her educational progress and goals, but she was never a student in any of my traditional courses I taught on campus. The interview was conducted in her home.

Graduate 2 is in her early 20s, engaged to be married in April 2010. She and her fiancé live in an apartment and are trying to save enough money to buy a house when they get married. She is employed full time and has a second part-time job. She is attending night classes toward a bachelor's degree in business administration and is planning on taking graduate courses toward a

master's degree in business. Graduate 2 was one of my academic advisees and a student in two of my traditional classroom courses. We developed a casual relationship and she has continued to communicate about personal events in her life. She came to my office for the interview.

Graduate 3 is in her late 40s and employed full time at the same job she's had for 24 years. Her supervisor, owner of the company, has confidence in her ability to manage his business. When I was introduced to him, he made the comment that she was his most valuable asset and did an excellent job of managing his office. She and her husband live in the same area in which they grew up. She has no plans to pursue another degree on any level. We worked very closely on her educational progress the last year of her program. That was when she realized she could actually complete the requirements to earn an associate's degree in management within a much shorter time span than she expected. Although she was my advisee, we never met until the interview. The interview was conducted in her office after work hours.

Graduate 4 is in her mid 20s. She and her husband rent a house and plan to save to purchase a home as soon as she's finished with an MBA program. Currently, she is taking night classes and lacks five more courses to earn her bachelor's degree in business administration. She is employed full time and plans to move up in the company instead of changing employment but is open to changing companies if better opportunity arises. As her academic advisor, I met with her each semester and discussed her educational progress and goals but she was not a student in any of my traditional courses. The interview with Graduate 4 was conducted in the area's public library.

Graduate 5 is a single male in his early 20s. He lives with his parents, has full-time employment, and is contemplated attending law school after he completes his bachelor's degree. After taking a year off to get settled in his new job, he is now in the process of applying to a 4-

year institution's online program to earn his bachelor's in business administration. He offered to come to my office on a Saturday morning for the interview because he wanted to discuss his options of earning a bachelor's degree. We addressed his interests and options to his satisfaction before we conducted the interview. Even though I was his academic advisor, we seldom discussed his educational progress except at the end of his program. We had met very briefly once before when he came to my office to pick up a copy of a test he had missed. He completed all his courses either at off-campus locations or online.

### *Interview Results*

The interviews opened with an explanation of the purpose of the study. The Graduates were informed that the purpose of the study was to discover students' perceptions of online courses and all that was involved in delivering and participating in distance learning. The purpose was not to credit or discredit any person or course but to bring to light what they felt was beneficial and what they felt was detrimental in their quest for knowledge and acknowledgement of success in online learning. The interview was divided into three sections: changes in the student market, faculty and administration's influence, and technology's influence.

#### *Section 01: Changes in the Student Market*

*Reasons for Choosing Online Learning.* The first question addressed the reason the Graduates had chosen online classes over other forms of course delivery. Graduates 1, 2, 4, and 5 stated job responsibilities as the main reason for taking online courses although other reasons were cited as supportive reasons for choosing distance learning. Their responses echoed the same reasons of convenience and flexibility that were revealed in the document reviews. Graduate 1 stated:

**Well, I work so online was a lot easier for me plus I'm older and, uh, it was just a lot easier to do the online and, you know, I could—they accommodated**

**my time. I could do the work at night, late or in the mornings or anytime I wanted to work on them.**

Graduate 4 explained that her work schedule was difficult to accommodate with traditional classes:

**Well, mostly work. Uh, I kind of work a flip-flop schedule. I work day shift and evening shift and, if I have to fill in, midnight shift. So it was a lot easier to fit an online. I could work on it as I could. As, you know, I didn't have to worry about being, say, I have to have off Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at a certain time.**

Graduate 3 stated travel distance as the main reason for her choosing online because she lives approximately 90 minutes from VCC's campus:

**Well, because of the convenience and flexibility. Because I work full time, and of course, at the time I had a daughter at home and family responsibilities and, more importantly, was that there wasn't any of the classes offered close off campus—close to me so I would have had to have driven to the college, which you know how far that is.**

When asked if they preferred online or traditional course delivery format, all five Graduates stated that they preferred online. One graduate had had around 20 online courses and the other graduates had had from 8 to 10 online courses. It appeared that the more online learning students had, the more likely they were to prefer online learning over the traditional classroom setting. Graduate 1 explained the reason for her preference for online learning:

**You know, I really loved the online. You know, when you're in a classroom, uh, we have a teacher talking, you know, you're in a classroom with a bunch of students, and I really think you can get kind of nervous really easy. But when you're at home, and you're reading the material, and you have to read it, because the questions are, you know, all the questions are adapted to that reading, I mean, you have to read it. So, and you're doing it at your own time, and at your own pace, so it just made it a lot easier.**

Graduate 4 described her preference:

**I do prefer online to traditional. I like doing my own pace, you know, doing my own work at when it's comfortable for me. Gets kind of boring having to sit in a class and listen, especially if you already know the topic. You know, if**

**you've read and you've done your homework ahead of time, it gets kind of boring. Some students don't understand it and you have to do it over and over and over and it gets boring.**

When asked if he were hesitant about doing online courses, Graduate 5 replied:

**I was actually. If it wasn't for the job, I would have certainly taken classes face-to-face cause I'm a visual learner. And at the time, I would have certainly taken classes face-to-face but looking back, I'm very glad I was stuck with online courses.**

*Positive and Negative Experiences with Distance Learning.* The graduates were asked to explain their most pleasant and negative experiences they had in any of their online courses. The positive experiences could be used to establish common practices and tools that students perceived as beneficial to their learning. The negative experiences would be those to avoid or manipulate to create a pleasant learning experience. They all had different experiences and all but one of the experiences were faculty related. To alleviate any negative outcomes, pseudonyms were assigned to courses and any other information that identified courses or any faculty member. The pleasant experiences of Graduates 1, 3, and 5 were how quickly the instructor communicated back when there were questions or concerns about the course. The Graduates also expressed the importance of instructors being available to interact when students needed assistance. Graduate 2 cited the convenience of being on vacation and still being able to complete and turn in her homework as being her favorite experience. Graduate 4 explained one of the course assignments as being one of her favorite experiences indicating comfort in her learning environment. This is considered instructor related because the instructor created the assignment:

**One of my favorite things that I had, and I can't remember which class it was, uh, I think it might have been [course 5] that I took online. We had assignments, you know, you do assignments every week that you have to do a little thing and do, write a little paper about, and it was a perception of something. It had a picture and how do you see it? You know, there's two different ways to see it. And I actually had fun with that one cause I took it to**



**work and my co-workers, I kind of shared it with my co-workers and kind of compared it. And I really like that cause it put together that, “yeah, they saw something completely different than what I did. So I really like that.**

The negative experiences were all directly instructor related and the experience lasted throughout the entire course. The lack of communications contributed most to the negative experiences. Graduate 1’s experience involved an entire course. Both courses she mentioned were canned courses created and set up with course cartridges from the publishing company:

**Well, I had—the [course 3] was uh, [course 3] was ok. The [course 1] was rough and that was for a semester, too. It just seemed like, you know, that he wasn’t really helpful at all. That teacher wasn’t. The professor that taught [course 1], but, uh, he didn’t have any interaction at all—none—there was no interaction. And it was pretty much, uh, read and do your work. And, and, you know, there wasn’t any of the, uh, I don’t know what we called that, you know, on the Blackboard where students spoke to each other. I don’t remember having that in that class, which I think was real important. And another thing that he kind of, uh, did was, uh, I think he prioritized people, kind of, and maybe not as fair as he should have been.**

Graduate 2’s negative experience referenced faculty communication practices in two courses also:

**I would have to say it was the [course 2] and [course 5] that I took. The instructors were very vague on what they wanted. Uh, they kind of gave you the lead way to do, uh, what you thought they wanted and it turned out they didn’t want what you sent in to them. Or if you tried to call them, they were hard to get hold of. They wouldn’t return phone calls. And I like having, you know, if I have a problem I don’t like waiting three or four days to hear something back. I want an answer, you know, within the next 24 hours so I don’t have to be contemplating and going, “What do I need to do?” with it being due.**

Graduate 3 had two negative experiences that she remembered. She wasn’t worried about a negative outcome with the first experience because she had had that instructor for other online courses. She was frustrated that she spent so much time trying to find answers to a test for a different course.

**Well, the one thing, the only thing I could think of was that one test and that's about all. I just freaked out, you know, when I, uh, saw that.**

When asked how she felt the instructor would handle the situation, she stated that she was sure the instructor would work it out because that instructor had always been helpful to her. Her second negative experience involved another instructor's communication practice:

**Well, well, that one [course 5] was when I came upon a problem, it was a while before, you know, before he would get back with me on that and I couldn't go any further with the assignment because, you know, if you don't get formulas right or, you know, if that's what you're working on then you couldn't go any further with the assignment so that was a little frustrating.**

Graduate 4's negative experience was with a canned course. Although she attributed the subject matter somewhat for her negative experience, she had made comments throughout the interview about the lack of communications with this instructor.

**The one thing that I really, really did not like was [course 3]. I took it online and you had to do labs. I've never, never been a [subject] person. I hate [subject]. I hated it in high school. It was really hard not having someone there to show me how to [set things up]. It was kind of, you kind of had to learn as you went. And if you made a mistake, you had to start completely over. And it was really time consuming and that really frustrated me that I couldn't get it. So, you know, I think that might have been a little better if I had some hands on just because it was the subject, you know, that I'm not comfort with. I don't like it at all.**

Graduate 5's negative experience was also with an entire canned course. He attributed the instructor's lack of communication and for his negative experience.

**It wasn't a, probably a certain thing; it was an entire course. I took a [course 4] class, which was one of the last classes to graduate, and the professor posted for the first time, put all the work up. That was it! I would email, everything, about something I didn't understand. Never heard anything back. Luckily, uh, I found I passed the course and graduated but I heard nothing throughout the whole semester from that particular professor which was not a good experience.**

When asked if he would have taken anymore online courses if this had been the first class he took, he replied:

**Probably not. It would have been a major turn off. I would have thought they were all alike, which I found out later that they're certainly not all like that from my experience through my associate's degree. But, that was the worst. That was definitely the worst one I've ever taken.**

The Graduates were much more vocal about their negative experiences than they were about their positive experiences. Graduate 3 was also asked would she have taken any more online courses if her first experience had been negative.

**I don't know about that (laughs). I guess probably the, if it was the only way that I could, I might take another one. Uh, if it was available to me through a class, you know, I might not would; and, if it was close to where I didn't have to travel far. Uh, with the experience I had, I would do it again.**

Graduate 3 said based on her experience she would suggest online learning to students if the students were willing to dedicate the time needed to do the work. Her advice was, "If you can't discipline yourself then you might want to take the class" in a traditional classroom setting.

*Differences in Online and Traditional Face-to-Face Courses.* All the Graduates except Graduate 2 stated the main difference between online learning and traditional classroom learning was that in online learning, students had to be self-motivated. Students worked at their own paces and learned more because they have to actually read the course information instead of depending on the instructor to tell them what they need to know. Graduate 2 cited the discussion boards to be the main difference between online learning and traditional courses. She stated that:

**You learn a lot about people from what they write because people write, I think, on a more thought-out level than they would just talking in a classroom in a discussion.**

The Graduates stated that compared to other forms of course delivery, online learning was more supportive of how they learned and offered them the greatest opportunities to learn because

students had to take the responsibility to learn without having the instructor stand over them.

Graduate 1 explained comfort as her support for greater learning opportunities:

**Yeah, there's the comfort of the online. Probably that the online does offer you a little bit more learning opportunity because you're able to go through the classes maybe a little bit faster. And I think you learn, actually, I think you learn a little bit faster. You retain a little bit more. Some of the classes, some of the math classes even that I had—took one math class at one of the schools. I had a terrible time with that. I took it online and I did great (laughs). It's like, it was just, you know, I was able to take my own time, figure it out my own way and maybe it had something to do with me being a little older and learning things a different way than being mixed in with some of the younger students, I don't know.**

When asked which method of delivery he thought best supported how he learned,

Graduate 5 explained his preference of online learning:

**If you had asked me this when I first started, I would definitely say traditional. But at this point, and it didn't come overnight; it came throughout my whole degree, I think I can learn online better because I don't have to come to a place at a certain point in time. I can do it when I want. I tend to, you know, learn better in my room, reading, reading, doing what I want in my own ways. And then, if I have any problems, I can, uh, I can certainly email the instructor and get an answer just as I would in a face-to-face so I would say online.**

Graduates 3 and 5 stated that they spent as much or more time in their online courses compared to their traditional courses. Graduate 3 said she was more comfortable in distance learning courses.

**I'm not really, I might not appear to be right now but I'm, I'm shy in a group. I can't speak out. And I felt more comfortable being able to ask questions in the online classes than I would have—I probably wouldn't have asked any questions in a classroom.**

When asked if she would have participated in classroom discussions, she replied:

**Not unless I was forced to, probably. I mean, not unless I was pointed out and specifically asked to participate or, you know, what do you think? That's the only way. I wouldn't have voluntarily, I don't think.**

*Culture of Distance Learning.* Culture is defined as a second social force that “incorporates the set of values, ideas, and attitudes that are learned and shared among the members of a group” (Kerin, Hartley, & Rudelius, 2009. p. 76). Students express the feeling of being alone in distance learning. The most frequent difference student note in distance learning is the absence of the teacher and other students. Students noted that a con of distance learning is not being able to raise their hands to get an immediate response from the instructor. The Graduates addressed culture in their interviews. When asked if distance learning had its own culture, all Graduates noted that it did and it was created, reinforced, and sustained by the discussion topics assignment. Students were required to make an initial response to a topic description and make replies to two of their peers’ responses. Graduate 4 said that students could really be themselves in online discussions instead of censoring comments as they might in face-to-face discussions.

**I really liked the, you know, where you could post your paper and other students could see your paper and kind of comment off it—I really liked that. I think there’s more interaction that way. If you don’t have to face somebody, you’re going to be more open minded, willing to say what you really mean. You know, cause you don’t have to face these people and say, “Oh, well, this person really doesn’t like anything I have to say.” You know, it’s not. So I think you’re more open minded.**

Graduate 1 stated that the discussions provided an opportunity for students to interact and become acquainted with each other.

**Yeah, and you got to know everybody in the classroom just from, you know, just from the—it’s the Blackboard. You know on Blackboard. So, I mean, even in kind of, uh, you got to know a little bit about them and their views on things. You couldn’t be biased cause you couldn’t see them (laughs hardy).**

*Students Fostering a Stronger Distance Learning Environment.* Students can learn on their own. Given beneficial guidance, they can learn and fulfill requirements that generate successful evaluations. The Graduates responded to the question “How can

students create a stronger environment online?” by focusing on their own behavior. The three criteria addressed were communications, consideration, and participation. These three criteria were tied together by students being considerate of their peers by participating discussion assignments in a timely manner. They all made comments that supported the fact that the instructor initiated the factors that supported strong learning environments. Graduate 1 explained the opportunity to get to know other class members by participating in the discussion assignment.

**Well, I know Blackboard is a really good way to do that. You know, the different questions and things that [instructor] would have us to answer; we really got to know people that way. Uh, I think that’s a good way. And maybe more of the same thing would help, you know, a little bit more of it. I really don’t think you have to meet with people you take online classes with. It’s nice to know that they’re there for help and support.**

In the online courses she didn’t favor, Graduate 1 said that there was nothing students could do to make the class better.

Graduate 2 also said that students could be supportive through their discussions but she mentioned the instructor’s role in that practice.

**I guess we could support the learning environment by the discussions, you know, but as far as that, I would think that the teacher would have the responsibility to put the information on there for us to be able to add to.**

When asked how students could foster a stronger learning environment, Graduate 4 emphasized communicating with the instructor.

**Definitely interacting with the professor. If you’re having problems, you need to speak up as soon as you know you’re having problems. You know. Online, it’s more you, your responsibility. If you don’t understand this, you need to get some help. I mean, I’ve heard a lot of kids say “I don’t like online classes because you get so far behind.” Well, if you’re getting behind, you need to speak up and say, “Hey, you know, maybe this isn’t for me or what am I doing wrong.”**

All graduates agreed that self-motivation and self-discipline were necessary criteria for students to be successful in distance learning. Students have to make themselves read the materials and set up a regular schedule to work on their classes. Their advice was to not wait until the last minute to complete the assignments.

All the Graduates spoke favorable of deadlines. Graduates 1, 2, and 5 commented on students having the option of working ahead. Graduate 1 stated that the students should move as a class. Even though she made positive comments of working on the courses when she wanted, she also explained positive experiences with the interaction of the discussion boards. Graduate 2's comments on the issue were:

**Uh, yes and no. The reason why I say that is you have these people that will sit down all in one lengths time and get that whole class done. And I think that's defeating the purpose of it, too. They're just trying to get it done, get it out of the way, get it out of their schedule. And then, on the other hand, it's just nice to know what's expected of you. Like I said earlier, when you're, when you have a life and you're trying to balance life at school, especially if you're an adult learner or what not. But then, like I said, you've got those people that will like, "Ok, well, I want to sit down here and I'm going to do the first five weeks of this class and not worry about it for five weeks." I don't think you learn anything that way.**

Graduate 5's comments supported Graduate 2's concepts of student not being able to learn a "whole course in 2 weeks." He suggested taking it "easy and go with the flow of the instructor." His comments to the question of whether students should be able to work ahead were:

**I think there should be a cut off to it. If not, someone is just going to go in there, obviously, there's going to be one or two, go in there for two weeks and try to do the whole thing and just take the rest of the semester off.**

## *Section 02: Faculty and Administration's Influence*

The Graduates were asked their opinion of the quality of online courses in reference to the clarity of assignments, presentation of course information, and the instructor's participation

throughout the semester. This section addressed instructors' practices in using the tools available such as tests, discussion topics, written assignments, and tools for submitting these assignments.

The Graduates discussed the level of professionalism, expertise, and helpfulness instructors demonstrated in the online course they implemented. The Graduates did not make clear distinctions between the tools and practices in their explanations of their perceptions.

*Quality of Clarity of Assignments.* The Graduates commented that most of their assignments were easy to understand. Graduate 1 had had the most online courses in the group and she had extensive experience in both good and bad distance learning courses. She suggested that distance learning should have a standard to follow.

**Yeah, I've seen the good side of it and bad side of it. But, you know, I had a couple of classes that were really hard because they weren't clear with their assignments. And they wouldn't, uh, give you the support probably that was needed. You know, one semester I think it was the end of the semester before I even found out from the guy if I was for sure in the class (laughs). You know, I did all my work and turned it in. And it was a tough one. I mean, to really do, to really learn in online classes, there has to be a, uh, set standard. Maybe everybody should follow that standard in order for it to be successful. But, you know, there ought to be interaction, you know, clarity in the assignments and some type of interaction with the professor. So maybe if that's in there, too, you would have more people doing online.**

Graduate 2 distinguished between distance learning and traditional classroom instruction.

She stated that the instructor was responsible for the setup and progression of a course.

**Most of my classes were very clear of what I needed to do. There was only probably about three of them that I can vaguely remember being, you know, not very clear of what they wanted, needing, you know, an unboundable amount of work that, you know, you just can't, and I think, especially in the [course 2] class; it did not need to be online. It should have been an in-class class only. It should have been a traditional classroom because of the fact that there was whole lot of what she needed to instruct us on how she wanted, you know, cause you can read in between the lines with everything that she posted. I mean, you have to do a résumé in that class and, yes, I still use that résumé today because it turned out being, you know, really good. But she wanted us to home make that by her dimensions and everything else. And**



**that wasn't clear at all. If people could have took that any other way, any way they could. I mean, maybe it was just the person itself, you know. Maybe she didn't know how to conduct herself with an online class. You have to have a feasible standard, I mean, you've got to. You can't have an unbelievable amount of work. There is no way without you working until 3:00 in the morning, every single morning, you know, every night to try to get something done. I mean, that's what we just went through.**

Graduates 3 and 4 said overall the instructions and contacts were good or at least adequate unless you had a problem. Assignments were posted in a timely manner and were easily accessible. With the exception of [course 4], Graduate 5 spoke highly of distance learning courses.

**Fantastic! I mean everything is laid out for you. There's usually a paragraph or two there you can read. And if you don't understand, you can definitely call. But usually you don't even have to do that. I think they're great. And they're just getting better from what I can tell.**

*Quality of Course Presentation.* The Graduates were asked to describe their perceptions of the how the course content was presented. Graduates 2, 3, and 4 were content with the course presentations. Graduate 2 said that the syllabus should contain all the information needed to successfully progress through a course. Although she didn't mention an assignment due date schedule by name, she talked about its benefits in her response. Graduate 3 stated that the information she needed to know was very clearly presented. Graduate 4 commented that course presentations were bland in all courses. She said what was expected of her as a student was presented in a good way but not any better or worse than it would have been in a traditional course. Graduate 5 spoke positive of his courses' presentations. He said he had no problems opening any files because he had all the necessary programs on his computer. When asked if he ever had problems opening files, he replied:

**No, not that I recall. Actually, I've been really fortunate with that cause I know a lot of people are totally turned off to online courses because they can't get them to work like they want them to. But, uh, I guess I do have all the readers and everything on my computer because I do love computers.**

Graduate 1 discussed her perceptions of how the instructions to complete discussion topics assignments were clearly stated. She explained a positive experience with the interaction with other students and the instructor that this assignment created.

**Well, on the discussion board, you knew what was expected of you. I mean, you knew, you knew you had points that was—I mean, we knew what we had to have. So we knew how long they had to be and how many times we had to interact, uh, with other students. Now, in some of the other classes, (shakes head) not so clear. I took the [course 2] online, also [course 1] and we had no interaction whatsoever in either one of those classes with other students or, you know, the teacher. You could go—well, [course 2] was a little bit better than the [course 1]. We could go for days and not get responses and, uh, that's not good cause the student is sitting there waiting for a response and we kind of expected it a little bit faster. Within a certain period of time, before you move on to something else for sure, or another section, or chapter, or whatever.**

*Instructor's Participation and Effort.* The Graduates' perceptions of instructor's participation coincided with their perception of feedback. They explained that they knew when an instructor was putting very much effort into the class. All Graduates said that instructor participation was a very important criterion to helping students enjoy the learning experience. Graduate 1 stated:

**I'll tell you one of the things that I found really, really, really hard, especially with the [course 1] was, you know, if you're doing something wrong and you don't know it, so, you know, that feedback is real important because it's just your way of learning. Uh, so feedback is probably the most important thing as far as the instructor goes—feedback.**

Graduate 2 explained her perceptions of instructor participation.

**Uh, I had a good teacher that when we did our discussion boards, [she] was very good on that. If [she] didn't like the answer and [she] wanted to pry more, then that would give us a chance to still get a great discussion grade, you know, by [her] asking another question and us answering that question to give [her] a full answer of what [she] needed. I mean, I think that that's**

**giving feedback of [her] showing “well, ok, she learned something, you know, this week. She actually read and she actually analyzed what she, what she learned and put it to the test.”**

When Graduate 2 was asked how she felt about the instructor acknowledging her work, she replied:

**It makes you feel important. It makes you feel like they care; that you’re just not another name on the roster that they’re trying to get, you know, to have their X amount of students and all this stuff. I mean, it makes you feel like they actually care that you succeed.**

She explained that instructors were the strongest influences in the classes. Her statement was, “The teacher makes the classes.”

Graduate 3 was asked if she felt that she knew when the instructor had visited the class and if it were important to know that the instructor had been there and would continue to check on the class throughout the semester. She explained:

**Yes, of course. We always had the discussion questions and [she] always responded to the questions, you know, to each one of us. [The instructor’s class visits were] very important cause I felt like she is a part, or he, is a part of the class as well as the students. So I think that they, you know, you should know that they’re devoting as much time or, you know, as you are.**

Graduate 4 said she felt that some of the professors could do a little better on the participation end. She appreciated an acknowledgement of when she did something right and would have appreciated at least one email from her instructors. She was ok with the instructor not interacting with her except when she had a problem. Her final statement on this issue was “I like knowing somebody at least knows I’m out there.”

Graduate 5 said, for the most part, that instructors devoted time and effort to distance learning. He commented that one of the classes he took online, [course 8], “showed that not much time was spent” on it. His comments on instructor’s participation were

**For the most part, it's been great. Never had a problem except that one occasion. Getting hold of someone and actually getting a prompt response, I mean, within minutes at times. Very, very prompt; very good.**

The Graduates explained that instructors could foster a positive distance learning environment through participation, communicating, and being available to help students. Only Graduate 2 assigned a time duration for instructors to spend in the class. She stated that instructors should spend about 5 hours a week in the class. Graduate 1 suggested a variety of things such as planned courses, a syllabus, and discussion boards. She also said that the instructor should know where the class is just by going through the discussion boards and tests and changes should be made if necessary.

Graduate 4 expressed communications as a means for the instructor to foster a positive distance learning environment. Her response was that instructors should:

**Definitely being available. Letting students know when they're available. Uh, that's hard, I know with professors that teach online and traditional classes, trying to get that time. Uh, but just kind of letting them know "I'm here if you need me and if there's something you don't understand, that you're not getting that you should be, just let me know; we can arrange a time to get together."**

Graduate 2 explained ways that the instructor could be supportive of distance learning. Her description was:

**[Instructors] would log in quite often and they would, you know, and they would give their feedback, maybe, and that would keep more of a set time that you're still, that you can get a hold of this person, you know, if they log in. Say, "I'm having trouble with, you know, what do you mean about this question?" And you can do a discussion board about it. Maybe some of your fellow students can help or whatever, but, the main thing is when the teacher helps you. You know, you feel like hey, they want you to succeed instead of, you know. I've had some teachers that you could have put in an email to them or a phone call and they don't even care. They don't care to get back to you. Then you have to track them down when it should be, "Hey, my student has a problem." "I need to track this student down to see what I can do to help clear her mind. What they need to do."**

Graduate 5 suggested that instructors be interested and assertive in the class. He said that this would create more participation. He made the comment that instructors should make a post a week which may be “a lot for people teaching several online classes.” Graduate 3 said that instructors shouldn’t have to spend as much time in the courses as students, but they should spend enough time to know an answer if students ask questions.

*Most and Least Effective Instructor-Related Practices.* Graduate 1 explained that she thought professors should be available when students needed to talk with them. She said, “they could be friendly, too,” so students could feel as if they could ask their professors any question. Communications could also be written but care should be taken not to use certain bad lines or be so abrupt because emotions show through in written messages more so than in face-to-face conversations. Her experience with the least effective instructor-related practice was the instructor’s lack of interaction with the students.

Graduate 2 also cited good communications as an effective practice. She had positive comments about the interaction between students in the discussion topics and the instructor’s comments to students’ responses. Students were expected to be active in the course on a weekly basis; therefore, instructors should also meet that requirement. She also said she liked the instant feedback on tests. The least effective instructor-related practice was the lack of feedback. Her statement on the importance of instructor feedback was, “You’ve got to have feedback in order to progress your learning.”

Graduate 3 said that active participation to be the most effective instructor-related practice. She labeled essays to be the least effect but accredited that decision to the fact that she didn’t like essays. She said that was her least preferred and maybe not the least effective as far as practices go.

The way the instructor tied current information to the textbook information was what Graduate 4 remembered as being most effective.

**I loved that when we went over chapters, there was always an article or something that [the instructor] had used to tie in to what we're learning in the real life. It's so easy to sit and read a book and say, "This is the way it should be." "This is how it's supposed to be done." And then when you get in the real world, you're going, "ohmigod, you know this is (gestures with hands)." "I don't know what I'm doing." So I really liked that that was tied in to, you know, what you were learning with what was actually going on in real life. I really liked that.**

Her least effective practice was "all the reading." Her complaint was that the instructor didn't offer any guidance in what information was important to know for a test. She said she was required to read everything just for the sake of doing it and not really to learn or to earn a good grade. When asked if her first experience with distance learning had been negative, would she have taken another distance learning course, she replied:

**I think it might of depended on what the problem was. If I felt more it was me, I did this, you know, I should have done better doing this and this and this, then I would have said, "Yeah, I might try it again." But if the first time around, if I had had a bad experience with the teacher, communication, then, no, I probably wouldn't have; wouldn't have tried it again.**

The way the instructor used the discussion topics was what Graduate 5 remembered as being most the effective instructor-related practice to him.

**I would probably say the message board is my favorite. With the questions, like that [the instructor] would ask, once a week or whatever, was great. I would have to read to come to a conclusion, uh, my question then I would always click into others' answers and sometimes comment on them That's great. I think that's a really good thing. It puts the class like they're there together. And they can discuss and they can pick up off each others' answers.**

Instructors not using some of the available tools were the least effective practice. He had not considered that some of the more advanced technology tools would not function with dial-up

Internet connections and instructors had to consider all students' accessibility when creating courses. When this issue was explained to him, he replied:

**Right, and that's when a class becomes a burden; when you have to go somewhere to do it. You know, and that's not the way it should be. But technology is not all the way there for some things. I think a lot of people should take that into consideration as far as instructors go. But it will be there eventually.**

Graduate 5 had a negative instructor-related experience with [course 4]. He had to purchase a \$50 course cartridge that was never used throughout the course.

**When I first bought and opened it up, I thought, "Wow, I can learn a lot from this" but we didn't use it. I mean, the tests didn't have anything to do with it or anything. It was just, it was worthless. It was a waste of money, for sure. I don't know how I passed the class. I never got any grades. I think it was just an impulse decision, to be honest with you. And that's horrible to say but, I, I never got a grade. It was after the class, I had emailed the professor and, you know, "this is all I need to graduate." "I did all my work." "Did I pass or not?" And I got an email back, "Yes, you passed." I don't know what I did on the tests, what I made. At that point, I was so frustrated, I just, I didn't care. That's negative to say as well, but I was just ready to graduate. That was my last experience here. It was a doozy.**

*Level of Professionalism and Communications.* These two categories are grouped together because the Graduates tended to associate professionalism with how the instructor communicated with them. Graduate 1 explained her feelings regarding two instructors.

**I think most of my classes were with [the instructor] and [that] was great. [The instructor] interacted with several of the students and were always there when we needed [her]. But, I mean, I just didn't have any problems with any of it other than that [course 1] class. It was like here's the book, here's the work, you know, and that's it. He just, he made some remarks, too, that I thought were even improper. So, uh, he just wasn't involved. He was never there for a question to be answered either. That class just didn't need to be online. It didn't needed to be done by that professor—one or the other.**

Another statement she made that tied professionalism and communications together was:

**Like I said, I had one class that I sent an email and didn't hear from him until the end of the semester. I thought, "Am I in this class or not." I mean, I really didn't know; it was bad. But I sent my work in and got a grade so (shrugs and laughs). I just went by the syllabus pretty much. That was it.**

In response to a timeline for instructors to respond to students' inquiries, her reply was:

**I think that at least within a 24 hour period. You know, if you have a test the next day and you're wanting to know something and it's about that test, then, you know, a good instructor will have your question answered that day. But just normally, maybe the next day. Not weeks.**

Graduate 2 tied in student success as a means to measure professionalism.

**You've got to know the subject that you're teaching online. You can't just be a baby sitter. If your students succeed, then you should feel like you succeeded, too, because you have put the knowledge subconsciously in their mind. When something down the road in their job comes up of, you know, a communication thing, they feel like, "Ok, well, we had this discussion, we had this, this is how I need to approach this." And when teachers don't act professional and they didn't communicate with you then you don't have that. You have a mental kind of block toward, you know, whatever that you didn't get the full answer for. I think that once two days passes, they just don't care. They're like, "Oh well, they (students) don't know what it is and I'll just give them the grade to make them not be on my back trying to bother me. It happened in that [course 5], I do believe because I know from the tests grades that I made, and I can say this now because I have the degree, I didn't not deserve a B in that class; not with the test grades that I had. I think it was a politics kind of thing. Yeah, I think that when a teacher knows what they're talking about, they're more respected and I think that as a student, you know, you can feel the confidence.**

Graduate 3 also associated student success with professionalism. She explained that her view of professionalism was demonstrated if an instructor were available or just helpful when you need help. Instructors should also want their student to learn and succeed and be helpful outside class responsibilities. One of her instructors proved to be helpful to her but she said she doubted that another instructor would have helped her at all. Based upon the [course 5] instructor's behavior in the course, her comment about his helping her was "I don't think he would have, and to me, I didn't feel like he was very professional.



Graduate 4 associated short, abrupt messages with instructors who were too professional.

**I think that a teacher can be too professional to the point to where they kind of come across like they don't want to be bothered. The teacher that I had for [course 9] and also for [course 10], there was no interaction with them. If I sent an email to ask if they received my work, it was always short, abrupt. I mean, they were real professional but they kind of came across that they were unapproachable. And, I really like somebody, I like somebody to be professional yet answers my questions but I don't want you to the point where "I don't want to be bothered with you" and that was kind of how it came across.**

With this barrier in mind, her comments in reference to communicating with the instructor were:

**I think the online classes, communication is what will make or break if a student does well, both on the instructor's and student's parts. If you have an instructor who won't answer your questions then you have a failure there. If you don't communicate and you have a problem, then there's no hope. If you're not that disciplined enough to do it on your own, to keep communications open, then you're probably better taking a traditional class.**

Graduate 5 had a positive opinion of instructors' professionalism. His response to the instructor's level of professionalism issue was:

**For the most part, it was absolutely incredible that, uh, never have to meet face-to-face but yet you can tell this person is very professional and know what they're doing. They're into what they're doing. And it was very important for me to see that. Because if I get on an online course and it just seems thrown up, thrown together, why should I care? The teacher doesn't care about that. But for the most part, I would say it's fantastic.**

He stated that communicating with the instructor is very important if the student has a problem.

The instructor shouldn't be obligated to answer last minute questions just because the student waited until the last minute to do the assignment, but for the most part, they did when he was in that situation.

*Instructor's Delivery of Expertise in Course Content.* The Graduates commented that most of the instructors of their distance learning courses were experts in the content area. Although they claimed this to be an important issue to them, this wasn't an area on which they elaborate very

much. They had suggestions for instructors who were contemplating putting a course online.

Graduate 1 emphasized structure in that students should know what is expected of them to successfully complete the course; information should be presented in an understandable manner..

**Everybody likes structure. I don't care how young you are, how old you are, you have to have structure. And those classes need to be structured. All of them; every one of them. And structured so that the student understands what's expected of them and I mean, they have to go through that certain criterion in that class. And I think that your really successful online classes are those—you don't struggle with those as much as you do the other ones because it's just a really neat way of learning. You know, you're having to absorb it at your own pace. Uh, you're expected to know it because you're going to have test out on it. You're going to have to really say something that makes sense.**

Graduate 2's advice to instructors was to clearly state the expectations of the course.

**Make your expectations of the class clear from day one when they access this thing. You've got to be able to understand feasible workload. You've got to understand that these people might be taking two or three more online classes. It's just not, they don't need to have the mindset of they're just in my class only.**

Graduates 3's advice was:

**Just be prepared, knowledgeable about the class and what you expect from the students in that class. Set guidelines.**

Graduate 4 was clearly focused with her advice to instructors who may contemplate creating and implementing a course for distance learning.

**Definitely let your students know you're available, number 1. Number 2, making sure that the assignments are clear, that, that there's not "well, do this and do that and do this." Be concise. Say this is what I want done. Make sure you have your deadlines. You know, make sure students know if you're going to be flexible with the deadline or if you're spot on—it has to be this day or that's it. That's definitely important, uh, especially if you get behind, if something happens. But the communication would be definite. I like kind of having a section that "I'm in my office on these days at this time and here's my number and here's my email." Kind of having it all together, you know, and letting students know I'm available, that's number 1, I guess.**

Graduate 5 stated that all his future education would probably be via distance learning if possible. Although he said that he favored online learning over F2F learning, he was ambiguous with this response. He had made prior comments of instructors being attentive and assertive in their distance learning courses.

**I'm not sure how to answer this question. I'm thinking it in my head but I'm not sure how to put it out there. Let the students know that you care and that you're able to teach the online class and let them know that you're into it as much as they should be into it. Do you know what I'm saying?**

He stated that he knew other students who had experienced problems with opening files because they didn't have programs on their computers that were compatible with the file types instructors use when posting the information on Blackboard. He stated that the courses that require programs not offered, such as MS Office, through the college should be flagged such as "require MS Office suite" or any other program necessary to access the course's information or to complete the assignments.

### *Section 03: Technology's Influence*

The Graduates stated that they preferred distance learning over traditional classroom learning and they all made comments that technology had enhanced their learning. None of the Graduates experienced any technical problems outside what the instructors could fix. Graduate 1 said that the structure of the online classes was important to her. She said she liked being able to read other students' discussions about the issues posted in the course. She did make negative comments about the online courses that were void of student interaction or instructor participation. Her suggestion for improving online learning was to "make sure every class has some structure."

Graduate 2 explained her experience with a software program, Applet, required for two courses. She said the publishing company offered no tech support and fixing anything was beyond the teacher's ability because the program key was purchased from the book company. Other than the Applet program, which she claimed to be "probably the most useless tool that I've ever used", she had very few technical problems. She identified the Applet program as a tool used to deliver online course content.

Graduate 3 said she never had a problem with technology. She said that she preferred the online tests and submitting her assignments through a submitting program that kept records of all activities.

Graduate 4 said luckily she never had any technical problems because she wouldn't know where to get tech support. She would have contacted her instructors to let them know her situation but if they couldn't help her, she would have had to guess about her next option. Like Graduate 3, Graduate 4 said that she preferred the assignment submitting program and said she never had a problem with anything on Blackboard except the Applet program. She reiterated Graduate 2's opinion of the program and said the experience with that program was awful. She said that instructors should post their own course materials instead of using publishers' course supplements. Her comment was:

**I don't think that they should just do what the publisher has and just—that's kind of taking the easy way out, the way I think about it. I mean, they're getting paid just to post what somebody else had done, you know, there's no personalization at all in there.**

She stated that her favorite online tool was the discussion board because of the participation. She stated that she felt instructors' personalities were basically the same in either learning environment.

**I think the personalities that come out with a professor in online would be exactly what you would get with a traditional, you know. I think if you have a professor that doesn't, you know, communicate with you on an online, I don't think that it would make that much difference in a traditional. But I, I was lucky that I had an overall pleasant experience. But I definitely think that you, you would definitely be the same in the classroom as you were with online. You know, I, I don't see there being a distinction there.**

Graduate 5's comments concerning technology's influence on his learning experiences were:

**Definitely enhanced my learning on online classes. I love computers. I've said that multiples of time, but, I'm always online. It's perfect for me to get online and get an education without having to drive somewhere. It's perfect.**

#### *Graduates' Closing Statements on Online Learning*

When asked to give an overall opinion of online learning, the graduates made positive comments. Graduate 1 again reiterated that she loved online classes. Her last note was emphasizing communications.

**I think even if just through email, I think it is really, really important. And I know when I first started on [instructor's] online classes, it was the introduce yourself kind of thing and [the instructor] replied back to everybody and we knew [the instructor] wanted to know the person. And, you know, that make a difference. You know you've got somebody there that kind of knows who you are and is going to be supportive, you know, is just going to be there so it makes a big difference. It makes a real big difference. It would be nice if all teachers did that and all professors.**

Graduate 2's overall opinion of online learning was explained:

**My overall opinion is that it was probably the best way of helping me obtain my degree while still working full time, developing a personal life, and, and, just, you know, I think it's convenient and I think that if the teacher knows how to teach the class, put it in a format, not expect, you know, an over, overload of work, then I think that online classes are just the way to go. They really are.**

Graduate 3 compared the traditional courses she had to those courses she completed through distance learning. When asked which learning environment she thought presented more information to students, she replied:

**I feel like with that, online classes are so much better and you know what you are required to do. Like I said, you do research along with everything else and I just feel like, with it, like I said with my experiences in the classes, I learn much more in the online.**

Graduate 4 said that more students would migrate to distance learning. With the changing student market, online learning is more accommodating.

**It's so much easier with the time constraint. There's a lot of people now, especially with the job market the way it is, that are realizing, "I'm not going to get it on what I've got, you know, I'm going to have to have an education." And unfortunately, there's people like me, like my work, there was no way that I could work and take traditional classes. It just wouldn't have worked out that way.**

Graduate 5 also predicted that more students would drift to distance learning to earn their college degrees.

**It's become, for me, it's become the standard. That's why I was checking with this, you know, for the King College online. For me, absolutely, it's become a standard for me. I can work. I can go home, then sit back at my own computer and not have to drive an hour and just get online and learn just like I would, uh, in face-to-face traditional, or better, in my opinion.**

The Graduates shared both positive and negative experiences with distance learning. The common criteria they shared concerning online learning were positive. They all stated that they felt they learned more in their online courses, that they would definitely take other distance learning courses, and that they would recommend online learning to other students. Through their comments and explanations, it appears that they felt the instructor was responsible for successful courses in both distance learning and face-to-face courses. They stated that the

instructor determined the level of success through communications and participation in the distance learning courses.

### *Field Study Analysis*

Seven online courses at VCC were selected as the setting for the field study. Field study data were collected from reviewing the participation behavior and collecting comments of 23 students who were enrolled in at least one of the selected seven distance learning courses for the 2009 Spring Semester at VCC. Course and student identities remained anonymous for the purpose of the study. The data collected represents the perceptions of successful students who completed their courses. These students complied with the rules set forth in each course, adhered to the deadlines, and completed the required assignments. Only two of these students scheduled meetings in my office with me due to missed tests. Four students were from other colleges and were taking a course at VCC because that course they needed wasn't offered at the college of their regular enrollment. Email was the most common form of communications and a reply was sent to all messages within 24 hours. Telephone messages were returned within 24 hours when possible. Nineteen of these students earned an A as their final grade and the other four earned a B.

Two discussion assignments were taken from each course to collect psychographic data on the students' perceptions of the course in which they participated. These discussions were completed at the beginning and the end of the semester. Students provided an introduction of themselves in the first discussion topic and the reason they were enrolled in the online course. The second discussion topic used in this study addressed which tools and practices students found beneficial and which ones were less influential to their quest for knowledge. There was also a request for students to make suggestions of how to improve the course.

The first discussion topic revealed that work responsibilities and schedules were the main reasons for the students to select online learning. Convenience and flexibility were the most popular benefits for taking online courses. The most popular loss was the face-to-face time of instructor and student interaction. However, one student stated,

**As long as the instructor is available during the semester, I can't see any losses. There is a loss if the instructor is not available and does not answer emails.**

Although some of the students preferred traditional face-to-face classes, all students considered distance learning to be an asset to the college and education in general. Students described their online learning course as being accommodating to work and personal schedules and providing as high a level of academic learning as traditional classes do. All students involved in the field study stated that they believed more students would migrate to distance learning. Comments such as "I like working at my own pace without distractions that you sometime have in a traditional classroom" and "I learned because I studied at my pace and was not in competition with others" were common throughout the data collected. Knowing that students are beginning to perceive more benefits in online learning will help instructors design courses that will support criteria that foster higher levels of learning.

The tools used in these courses were the discussion board, online testing, and essays. Providing responses and replying to peers' initial responses were weekly assignments on the discussion board with the exception of the weeks when essays were due. Students had to complete a test per week and three essays for the semester. Having weekly due dates was a practice favored by all students who commented on the issue. The instructor's communicating and meeting with students were also considered to be positive practices of the distance learning courses. Only one student expressed a negative opinion of the discussion topics. The other



students made comments that the discussion board was a great tool and that the discussion topic assignment was a positive practice that encouraged interaction among students and instructor. This practice provided the opportunity for students to become acquainted with everyone who participated in the assignment. It also allowed students to “speak freely without being intimidated” by other students.

Students stated that distance learning taught them time management and self-discipline. A first-time distance learning student stated:

**[This course] will deeply affect the way I learn. I have formed a huge degree of self-discipline which has helped me to learn better and more efficiently. Online courses such as this provide me to be able to read, understand, and comprehend the material.**

Students had positive comments about the courses having due dates, which they felt added to the structure of the courses. “Working at my own pace” was another practice students favored. Having due dates for assignments helped students work at their own pace while still requiring compliance within a timeframe. One of the four students from another college included a comment on due dates in her response.

**I prefer online classes over traditional classes because I can go at my own pace and can get grades back faster. I can also do my assignments whenever and wherever I want. I like knowing that I can do the assignments whenever within a certain time period.**

All the courses used in this study had the same structure and followed the same practices. The main criterion that individualized each course was course content. Another first-time distance learning student commented:

**[The instructor] posts the assignments and the deadlines, so you know exactly what is expected of you. She is also there, if you have any questions.**

Unlike the data collected from the interviews, the field study analysis didn’t reveal any tools and practices that students stated were useless or detrimental to their academic learning.

Most of the students who participated in this part of the study stated that they were comfortable with all the tools and practices used in the seven courses. They found the tools easy to use and adherence to the practices was easy, which explained their above average success in the courses. They perceived the structure of the courses to be supportive of completing the requirements necessary to be success in the course. These students understood and worked well in the distance learning environment.

### *Summary of Data Analysis*

The data analysis of this study consisted of analyzing document reviews, interviews, and field study analysis to determine students' perceptions of the tools and practices faculty used to deliver online learning. The three types of documents reviewed gave reason for VCC to focus on improving its delivery of distance learning to increase its share of the student market, to list demographic information of its current distance learning market, and to provide a brief insight of past students' perceptions of one instructor's online tools and practices used in delivering distance learning.

The interviews provided in-depth psychographic data of the distance learning experiences and perceptions of five 2008 graduates of VCC's Business Management Program. These Graduates' explanations provided an indication that distance learning is a growing product and, as with most products, that quality matters. Their explanations of their experiences and perceptions gave indications that grounded theories can be established that will help govern the design and delivery of distance learning.

The field study data were limited to one instructor's courses. However, the same categories emerged from this analysis as with the interview analysis except on a smaller scale.

The concepts and categories in this section were compared to those that emerged from the data collected from the DDL documents and researcher's memos and data from the interviews.

According to Merriam (1998), internal validity can be enhanced by triangulation, member checks, peer review, and explaining researcher's biases (p. 204). Rich, thick descriptions of students' perceptions were provided to extend the findings of the study to other distance learning courses beyond those discussed in this study. The three methods of data collection used to achieve triangulation were document reviews, interviews, and field studies. Theoretical concepts emerged from all three sources and were used to establish grounded theory that is applicable to distance learning courses. Member checks were confirmed by the graduates who participated in the interviews. Each graduate received a transcribed copy of his or her interview via email and was invited to make any needed corrections.

An independent auditor reviewed the data and discussed the categories that emerged from the concepts in the data. The concepts that emerged were that students formed perceptions of the tools faculty used based on how seamless the tools were integrated into the delivery of online learning. Students' perceptions of faculty's practices in using the tools were based on the social and academic benefits the practices created or cultivated. Although technology was a major factor in the study, students didn't convey strong perceptions of it because technology problems either didn't exist or were alleviated promptly for participants involved in the study. Students did express negative perceptions of some instructors' use of programs not affiliated as a function of the instructional maintenance program and not offered as a service through the program. Such perceptions were based on and limited to services available for purchase through publishers and files linked to other programs because those programs were problematic to the students who participated in the study.

With the exception of the data collected from the DDL Department and Institutional Research and Assessment Office, the study's participants were my students in one or more online courses. The data reflected students' perceptions of some of the tools and practices used by other faculty members but not used by me; therefore, I was not knowledgeable of the possible benefits of the tools and practices that students perceived as being negative when used to implement distance learning.

Most of the participants of the study explained both positive and negative experiences in completing online courses. The data collected were limited to the perceptions of students who were successful in the distance learning courses for which the data were collected. The interview participants discussed their perceptions of some online courses in which their final grade was a D and, therefore, were not considered successful students in those courses by VCC, but the credits still counted toward the requirements of their degrees. The courses did not have to be repeated. All respondents conveyed that they would recommend distance learning to other students.

## CHAPTER 5

### FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### *Introduction*

This chapter presents the findings of the study, theoretical implications, conclusions, and recommendations for further research. The first three chapters introduce the study, explain the purpose and direction of the study, present existing literature on distance learning, and describe the methods to collect data that explained students' perceptions of the tools and practices faculty use to implement distance learning. Chapter 4 presents students' perceptions of online learning and hopefully this presentation will encourage college administrators and faculty members to address the unique features of distance learning that support student retention and academic success in online learning.

This case study addressed online learning as one of the current innovations of education. This study also promotes the importance of understanding student behavior in the distance learning environment. Data collected for this study support existing data that online learning is a growing paradigm in the student market. Previous and existing models of teaching styles for the face-to-face academic environment have been used as guidelines for tools and practices faculty members use to create and implement courses for online learning. Currently, there are no dominant theories that relate explicitly to implementing online learning. Administrators and faculty members either work from trial-and-error experiences or the advice and experiences of other online faculty members. Studies conducted by The Sloan Consortium in 2002 through 2006 present results of faculty acceptance of online learning; however, scant data exist that disclose students perceptions of online learning (Allen & Seaman, 2007. pp. 18-22). Virginia Community College's Distance and Distributed Learning Department offers training and

services to assist faculty members make the paradigm shift from teaching in the traditional face-to-face environment to implementing online learning. Faculty training or adhering to DDL's suggestions in creating and implementing online courses aren't mandatory for faculty who teach distance learning courses at VCC.

### *Theoretical Implications of Findings*

Students' perceptions of the tools and practices faculty use to implement online learning were separated into three sections in reference to 1) changes in the student market, 2) faculty and administration's influence, and 3) technology's influence. The concepts, categories, and themes that emerged from the data of each section are explained in this chapter.

#### *Changes in the Student Market*

The existence of conflicts in schedules was the most frequently cited reason for choosing distance learning. Flexibility to work on assignments at a convenient time was an opportunity to obtain educational goals and still fulfill work and personal responsibilities. Comparing interview data with data collected from personal memos and field study, it appeared that as the number of online courses students completed increased, so did the students' preference of online courses over traditional face-to-face courses. The increasing price of fuel also had an influence in students' decisions to choose distance learning over traditional courses at VCC during the time of the study. Distance learning courses required no traveling which saved money that otherwise would go to fuel for traveling to the academic site. The time saved by not having to travel to class could be devoted to completing course assignments, family time, or work hours.

Online courses had no scheduling conflicts with other courses. This allowed students to take courses with no concerns about meeting or scheduling conflicts. Students explained that

work and other responsibilities took up more of their productive hours which left less time for what they classified as wasted time between classes. Students also cited a preference of working in a personal environment such as their home or office when permitted.

Students' comments in all three data sources were similar when describing student characteristics necessary for student success in distance learning. They claimed that students had to be self-motivated and had to practice self-discipline because instructors weren't meeting with them two or three times a week to remind them of what assignments were due or which chapters would be on the next test. Students had to be active learners and participate in their learning experiences.

The online environment offered students an opportunity to present only what they want other students to know about them. Students stated that online discussions gave students the opportunity to present more thought-out responses. One graduate stated that students are more likely to make comments online that they wouldn't make in traditional classrooms due to possible reactions of other students. Data from the three data sources contained students' comments stating the benefits of reviewing other students' comments prior to making their own responses to a discussion topic. The review gave them an idea of what others thought and offered a different or new perspective on the topic. This was a strong indication that students enjoyed and depended on other students to help them learn. This practice built a relationship among students and established an online culture unique to each course. Some students commented that distance learning cultures were stronger than traditional classroom cultures because online cultures included everybody whereas traditional classroom cultures only included those who participated in class discussions. Everyone had to participate in the online discussion topics so every student was a part of that culture. Shy students especially expressed comfort in the

distance learning environment. They said they could participate and make contributions to the course that they otherwise would not make in a traditional classroom setting.

### *Faculty and Administration's Influence*

Data collected in the document reviews, interviews, and field studies associated communications directly with the instructor-related aspects of the course. Positive experiences were discussed in the courses that the students claimed that they could rely on the instructor to communicate with them on a regular basis or in a short time span if there were conflicts with the course. Students expressed preferences of prompt feedback on submitted assignments. They also expressed strong favoritism of instructors participating in the discussion topics. With a positive experience in distance learning, data from personal memos, interviews, and field studies demonstrated that students would recommend their relevant courses, and online courses in general, to other students.

The most frequently cited negative experience was the instructor's lack of communications in the forms of course participation, responding to emails, and returning phone calls. A lack of instructor's interacting with students was also a common comment associated with a negative distance learning experience. Three of the interviewed graduates stated that they wondered if the instructor even knew they were students in his or her class. One graduate commented that he wondered if the instructor was aware of the course content and doubted that the instructor could pass the course if he were a student in his own class and had to follow the same rules and practices as his students. The lack of instructor involvement created very negative perceptions of the distance learning course.

Four of the graduates were asked if they would have taken another online course if their first online course had been a negative experience. Three of the four graduates said they doubted



they would have tried another online course if that had happened. Students in all three data collecting methods expressed appreciation of a structured course. They appreciated knowing what assignments were expected throughout the course, having due dates, and assurance that the instructor would be available to assist with problems if the need arose. The instructor's availability to meet with distance learning students was also considered high importance. Students expected a high degree of professionalism and a demonstration of expertise in the course content. That meant the instructor communicating with students and participating in the course enough to demonstrate a level of professionalism and expertise.

Students didn't make strong comments concerning the instructor's level of expertise in course content except that instructors were expected to "know their stuff." The three data sources reflected that students appreciated course assignments relevant to the subject and the instructor understanding feasible course requirements.

### *Technology's Influence*

This study did not produce evidence that students had notable problems with technology. All problems that were technologically oriented were alleviated to the students' satisfaction within a reasonable amount of time. However, one graduate suggested courses that require software programs outside the instructional maintenance program should be flagged so students would be aware of what software programs they would need to be successful in the course. All course documents should be created within the instructional maintenance program instead of instructors using links that lead to documents created in other programs.

### *Suggestions for Establishing Grounded Theory*

Data from the document review, interviews, and field study were compared to identify concepts, categories, and themes that emerged from the data. Findings indicated that even though students enjoy the flexibility of distance learning, they rely on instructors to create and implement an environment that cultivates students' social and academic success within the educational environment.

#### *Faculty's Responsibilities*

Students valued instructors' participation in distance learning. In the three data sources, students expressed positive attitudes about the discussions that were conducted as online class discussions. Faculty should devote as much class participation time in distance learning courses as they do in traditional face-to-face courses, which is typically 2.5 hours per week for a 3-credit course. Faculty should also review and respond to email messages and return phone calls at a minimum of 3 days per week. Courses should be structured with assignment descriptions and scheduled due dates for assignments throughout the semester. Students viewed instructor feedback as an important criterion to student success; therefore, instructors should provide feedback within a reasonable amount of time and especially before another similar assignment is due. As one student stated, show as much interest in the course as the student should have.

Instructors should make all assignments related to subject matter and not assign extra work to compensate for the lack of travel time. Written announcements should be posted or sent via email to notify students of all changes in any area of the course. Due dates and assignments should be identified at the beginning of the semester. Students also suggested that instructors include office hours or availability times in an explanation of the policy of the course.

### *Administration's Responsibilities*

When assigning faculty to distance learning, administrators should consider students' reluctance to participate in distance learning after negative experiences. Distance learning courses are more likely to be outsourced to adjunct faculty because instructors of online courses don't have to be on campus to implement the course. Given the fact that any online course may be a student's first experience with distance learning, administrators should evaluate the teaching credentials of adjunct faculty who teach distance learning with the same scrutiny as for those who teach traditional courses. To help alleviate a student's fear of distance learning, every online course should be evaluated at the end of each semester. This gives students the opportunity to voice an opinion of the quality of instruction and hopefully contribute to a higher quality of online learning.

Canned courses with publishers' content and practices only, requiring no instructor involvement, should not be permitted to be offered as distance learning. Instructors should create a predetermined percentage of course content.

### *Conclusions*

Three research questions guided the study to collect data from document reviews, interviews, and field studies to present the case study and establish grounded theory that may be used to increase the effectiveness of distance learning in higher education.

*Research question 1: To what extent do college students perceive faculty's practice of online course delivery as effective and meaningful in academic learning?*

Students who participated in the study had positive perceptions of distance learning; however, they did not all have positive perceptions of all the practices some instructors used to implement the courses, nor did they have positive perceptions of all the instructors who

implemented the courses. Just as one bad experience will deter students from participating in distance learning, a good experience will encourage it. One comment revealed in the document review indicated that the student had a bad experience with the first distance learning course in which he or she participated and this student swore to never take another online course. Because of work schedules, the student either had to take a course online or not take the course at all. This second course was a good experience for the student and he or she felt that as much or more learning was obtained in the distance learning course that could have been obtained in a traditional classroom setting. According to the data collected and reviewed, students' perception of faculty's practice of online course delivery depended on each individual faculty member's practice. In most of the distance learning courses in which the students participated, they did perceive faculty's practice of online course delivery to be effective and meaningful in academic learning.

*Research question 2: What responsibilities and practices of online instructors are perceived to enhance students' learning experience in online courses?*

Data from the three data sources revealed that students perceived that instructors' active participation in the courses enhanced students' learning experience in online courses. Students enjoyed the interaction among students and that with the instructor in discussion topic assignments. They perceived this assignment as an opportunity to get to know all the students in the class. Students voiced a greater desire to read all comments and interact with more students when the instructor participated in this assignment by making comments on students' responses to the questions and issues in the topic description. Reading all the responses and comments enhanced students' learning level. This exposed different views of the issues and enhanced

greater understanding of the topic. Students enjoyed participant and interactive learning with other students and the instructor of the course.

Frequent communications from the instructor was also viewed as a practice that enhanced student learning. Students commented that knowing the instructor was willing to help them if they needed help made the learning environment more comfortable. This also cultivated a desire to stay in contact with the instructor. The instructor's active participation in the class fostered a strong adherence to the interactive assignment due dates. Students adhering to due dates resulted in more timely class discussions.

Timely feedback was another practice student perceived as being positive. This included feedback on all assignments and students appreciated comments and acknowledgement on their work. Another practice that enhanced students' learning experience in online courses was instructors posting assignments online and allowing a feasible time for students to complete assignments. Students appreciated a structured online course that had structured assignments such as a weekly discussion topic assignment. Weekly due dates helped keep students stay focused and not procrastinate so long that it was impossible to catch up before the end of the semester.

*Research question 3: What measures can be taken to ensure that online courses are perceived to be as beneficial to students as traditional face-to-face courses are?*

Participants of the study indicated that they preferred quality learning that enhanced both social and academic advancements. Students had negative perceptions of courses that they said resulted in low learning levels for them. To ensure that students, other colleges, and industry perceive online courses to be as effective as traditional face-to-face courses are, there should be quality checks. Distance learning courses should have anonymous student evaluations every

semester. Course content, instructor's delivery practices, and relevance of outside resources are examples of criteria that may be evaluated. Any criterion receiving below a predetermined score should be reviewed by faculty's supervisor and discussed with faculty and possibly an employee of DDL.

### *Recommendations to Improve Practice*

Data collected from the personal memos, interviews, and field studies offer suggestions for improved practice in the tools and practices that faculty use to implement online courses. The following recommendations to improve online course implementation were recognized after examining the data:

1. The objectives of the course should be clearly described in the course syllabus.
2. Clearly state what software programs are necessary to successfully complete the course.
3. Include assignments that require students to interact with each other and the instructor.
4. Instructors should provide clear and timely feedback to students.
5. Before becoming available to students, distance learning courses should be reviewed by faculty peers and checked according to a quality criteria rating.
6. Before assigning faculty to create and implement a distance learning course, the potential faculty member's teaching credentials should be reviewed.
7. First-time distance learning instructors should work with an instructional designer or a seasoned online instructor.

As an incentive to adhere to these recommendations, the college could be supportive of distance learning faculty. The college could acknowledge the most effective online instructors. Release time could be offered to those seasoned instructors who work with first-time distance learning instructors to create online courses.

### *Recommendations for Future Studies*

It is recommended that further studies be conducted to include more students who participate or have participated in a greater variety of distance learning courses. The field studies data may reveal more activity if they could be collected by observing another faculty member's distance learning course from the beginning to the end of the semester. This would allow observation of changing behaviors as students settle in as a participant of the class's culture.

Based on the findings of the study, to cultivate student success in distance learning, it is imperative that administration assume a more assertive role in assigning faculty members to implement distance learning. Student evaluations of each distance learning course could assist in this responsibility. Most of VCC's administrators and faculty members have never completed a college level distance learning course; therefore, this environment is new to them. They don't understand the social adjustments and support that take place in distance learning. Instead of noting the benefits of developing self-motivation and self-discipline and learning how to take an active role in learning, they view distance learning as taking students out of the classroom and away from learning. This mentality has to change before administrators will pledge full support of faculty who implement distance learning courses and before faculty will pledge full support to academic learning and student success.

Before training becomes mandatory at VCC, a study should be conducted to determine what tools and practices are beneficial to students and which ones are detrimental to academic learning. The college should establish a list of criteria that each distance learning course should meet before becoming available to students. The college should also require faculty to spend a minimal amount of time per week participating and being active in the course above and beyond the time taken to create the course.

Distance learning continues to become a larger share of the student market. Students pay tuition rates for prominent distance learning colleges that are far above what they would pay for the same course at VCC. The main difference is the quality of the course. Continuous studies and evaluations of distance learning courses will contribute to students' positive perceptions of the practices faculty use to deliver online courses.



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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A

#### Interview Questions

##### *Changes in the student market:*

1. Why did you choose online courses over other forms of instructional delivery? If feasible and all criteria being equal, would you have chosen another form of instructional delivery—which form and why?
2. How many online courses do you remember taking during your studies at Southwest?
  - a. What is the most pleasant experience do you remember?
  - b. What is the least favored experience do you remember?
3. Other than not physically meeting for class sessions, what are the main differences do you perceive between online courses and traditional courses?
4. Which learning environment (online, blended/hybrid, Web-enhanced, or traditional face-to-face) provides the greater learning opportunities for you and in what ways?
5. To what extent did you feel the online course had its unique culture and did you feel as if you were a part of that culture?
6. Which learning environment, face-to-face or online, is more supportive of how you learn and in what ways?
7. How can students foster a stronger learning environment in online courses?
8. What advice would you give a student who is contemplating taking an online course?

##### *Faculty and Administration's Influence:*

9. What is your overall opinion of the quality of online courses in reference to:
  - a. the clarity of assignments
  - b. presentation of course information
  - c. instructor's participation
10. How can instructors of online courses foster a strong learning environment?
11. What were the most effective instructor related practices in the courses? What were the least effective?

12. What level of educational professionalism did the instructor demonstrate and how important was his/her professionalism to you?
13. How important was communicating with the instructor in reference to the course and how well did the instructor communicate with you?
14. What was the instructor's level of delivery in demonstrating his/her expertise in course information and teaching practices and how did he/she influence your learning environment in the course?
15. What advice would you give an instructor who is contemplating implementing an online course?
16. How quickly did you receive help with the course and course content?
17. How easy was it for you to access tech support and how efficiently was your issue resolved?

*Technology's Influence:*

18. What course tools did you find helpful in online courses?
19. How did these tools enhance your learning?
20. What available online tools did you find useless or irritating?
21. How did technology enhance or hinder your learning in online courses?
22. What is your overall opinion of online courses?

## APPENDIX B

### Telephone Script to Interview Participants

Hello (participant). This is Loretta Beavers. I was your advisor and the instructor of probably all of your online business courses you completed through the college. You are one of the eight 2008 graduates of the Business Management Program at (anonymous community college). I would like to ask if you would participate in an interview concerning your perceptions of online courses to help me collect data necessary to complete my dissertation for my doctorate program.

I am now in the process of writing my dissertation and I would greatly appreciate your participating in the interview. Your participation is strictly voluntary and you can withdrawal at any time before the dissertation is submitted for approval. The interview will take about an hour to complete and you won't be required to do anything before or after the interview. If you can schedule an hour within the next two weeks to help me with this part of my dissertation, I would sincerely your time and effort.

After you decide on the time and place of the interview, please send me an email to [Loretta.Beavers@sw.edu](mailto:Loretta.Beavers@sw.edu), I'll acknowledge your decision and send you back a written confirmation. If you prefer, we can schedule a time right now if you aren't too busy.

## APPENDIX C

### Informed Consent Form

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Loretta R. Beavers

TITLE OF PROJECT: A Case Study of Community College Students' Perceptions Regarding Faculty's Practice of Online Course Delivery: Virginia Community College

#### **EAST TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY**

This Informed Consent will explain about being a participant in a research study. It is important that you read this material carefully and then decide if you wish to be a volunteer.

**PURPOSE:** This study is a dissertation study necessary to fulfill the requirements of my doctorate degree in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis. The purpose is to discover students' perceptions of the tools and practices faculty use to implement online courses.

The purpose(s) of this research study is/are as follows:

An analysis of the data collected through the interviews should identify how students perceive the implementation practices of online courses and contribute to the effective delivery of online education. The results should also help establish grounded theories that can be used as guidelines in creating and delivering online courses.

#### DURATION

The interview will take 45 minutes to an hour to complete. Participants are not to requested to do any type of preparation for the interview or any type of closure afterwards.

#### PROCEDURES

I will ask you to explain your perceptions of various aspects of online courses. I will request your permission to record the interview so the script can be coded and categorized into similar concepts. I will also be taking notes to associate your emotions and expressions with your comments.

#### ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES/TREATMENTS

Your decision to not participate in the study will not affect you in any way. You can stop the interview and withdraw from the study at any time before the completion of the dissertation.

#### POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

This study does not pose any foreseeable risks or discomforts to those who participate.

**APPROVED**

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APR 27 2010

Subject Initials \_\_\_\_\_

BY CW  
CHAIR/IRB COORDINATOR

**ETSU/VAIRB**



PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Loretta R. Beavers

TITLE OF PROJECT: A Case Study of Community College Students' Perceptions Regarding Faculty's Practice of Online Course Delivery: Virginia Community College

#### POSSIBLE BENEFITS

You may obtain individual personal benefits for participating in this study if the results are used to create distance learning courses in which you may enroll. The possible benefits of your participation are the improvement of distance learning courses for educational institutions.

#### VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Participation in this research experiment is voluntary. You may refuse to participate. You can quit at any time. If you quit or refuse to participate, the benefits or treatment to which you are otherwise entitled will not be affected. You may quit by calling me, Loretta Beavers, whose phone number is 276-988-3308. You will be told immediately if any of the results of the study should reasonably be expected to make you change your mind about staying in the study.

In addition, if significant new findings during the course of the research which may relate to your willingness to continue participation are likely, the consent process must disclose that significant new findings developed during the course of the research which may relate to your willingness to continue participation will be provided to you.

In addition, if there might be adverse consequences (physical, social, economic, legal, or psychological) of your decision to withdraw from the research, the consent process must disclose those consequences **and** procedures for orderly termination of participation by you.

#### CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS

If you have any questions, problems or research-related medical problems at any time, you may call me, Loretta Beavers, at 276-988-3308, or Dr. J. Renner at 423-439-7629. You may call the Chairman of the Institutional Review Board at 423/439-6054 for any questions you may have about your rights as a research subject. If you have any questions or concerns about the research and want to talk to someone independent of the research team or you can't reach the study staff, you may call an IRB Coordinator at 423/439-6055 or 423/439/6002.

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

Every attempt will be made to see that your study results are kept confidential. A copy of the records from this study will be stored in Warf-Pickel, room 501 for at least 5 years after the end of this research. The results of this study may be published and/or

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PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Loretta R. Beavers

TITLE OF PROJECT: A Case Study of Community College Students' Perceptions Regarding Faculty's Practice of Online Course Delivery: Virginia Community College

presented at meetings without naming you as a subject. Although your rights and privacy will be maintained, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, ETSU, and personnel particular to this research, members of my dissertation committee, have access to the study records. Your records will be kept completely confidential according to current legal requirements. They will not be revealed unless required by law, or as noted above.

By signing below, you confirm that you have read or had this document read to you. You will be given a signed copy of this informed consent document. You have been given the chance to ask questions and to discuss your participation with the investigator. You freely and voluntarily choose to be in this research project.

_____ SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT	_____ DATE
_____ PRINTED NAME OF PARTICIPANT	_____ DATE
_____ SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR	_____ DATE
_____ SIGNATURE OF WITNESS (if applicable)	_____ DATE

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## APPENDIX D

### Informed Consent for Field Studies

#### Post-Semester Discussion Topic

The following information will be included in the topic description which will be posted after students have completed the course and their final grade posted:

I am currently in the process of writing my dissertation to complete my doctorate degree in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis through East Tennessee State University. The title of my dissertation is A Case Study of Community College Students' Perceptions Regarding Faculty's Practice of Online Course Delivery: Virginia Community College. Studying and analyzing participants' behavior and perceptions in the environment of study is a method of collecting data. This is called field study. I am requesting your permission and consent to use as collected data for my dissertation the information you provide in this post-semester discussion. Please note that upon your consent indicated by your participation in this last discussion, I will analyze and code your responses which may include going back and reviewing participation behavior throughout the semester. You will remain anonymous in the study. Only your participation behavior, perceptions, and comments will be included in the study. Your option to participate or not in the study will not affect your grade for the course.

Your participation is strictly voluntary and you may withdraw at anytime by contacting me by email, Loretta.Beavers@sw.edu or by phone, 276-964-7709 or 276-988-3308. If you have provided a response to the topic, your response will be deleted. This assignment will not be evaluated for grading purposes. The information you supply will be used for research purposes only. Grades are already posted in your Spring 2009 semester account for this course so there's no chance of your option to participate or not to participate or the content of your response affecting your final grade in any way. Your response will be deleted upon the final approval of my dissertation.

I would appreciate your providing a response to the following issues:

Was your decision to take this course online a necessity or choice? Would you have taken it in another format if given the opportunity; if so, which format would you have preferred? Will you take another online course?

Do you feel you learned as much course content in this online course as you would have in a traditional face-to-face format? In reference to course content, what benefits and/or penalties did this format of delivery offer you as a student that the traditional face-to-face format would not have presented?

Which group(s) of assignment did you favor and what assignments do you think should be changed?

How could I, as the instructor, have made this course better? Was the course information easily understood? Were the assignments clearly explained? Were submitting your assignments and completing the tests easily accomplished?

Please provide any other additional information which you perceive may be beneficial in improving online courses.

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REVIEW BOARD

## APPENDIX E

### Request and Approval to Conduct Study at VCC

From: Bob Tomlinson  
To: Loretta Beavers  
Cc: phyllis Christian  
Subject: RE: Approval for Dissertation

Sent: Fri 4/24/2009 4:09 PM

Loretta, the president gave his approval for your research. I look forward to the results and using them to improve learning for our distance learning students.

Good luck, Bob Tomlinson.

**From:** Loretta Beavers  
**Sent:** Friday, April 24, 2009 10:08 AM  
**To:** Bob Tomlinson  
**Subject:** Approval for Dissertation

Dr. Tomlinson,

This is just a reminded of our conversation we had yesterday afternoon regarding approval to do the research for my dissertation. As I explained yesterday, my committee is leaving before the end of June and your approval is the only item holding up ETSU's board approval to do my research.

If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me at ext. 7709 to clear up any confusion or lack of understanding. My study will be free marketing research for the college so only good can come from the study. I'll be happy to talk it over with you if you want to discuss the benefits for the college.

I hope to hear from you today.

Loretta Beavers

## VITA

### LORETTA ROBERTS BEAVERS

- Personal Data: Place of Birth: Welch, West Virginia
- Education: East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN  
Ed. D. Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis  
2009
- Morehead State University, Morehead, KY  
Eighteen graduate credits in marketing and management
- Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA  
M.S. Occupational and Technical Studies, Community College Teaching  
2000
- Radford College, Radford, VA  
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